Behavioral Crisis Communication

"The good Lord is pleased with every child."
Text: Rudi Schmidt

What makes former Federal President Wulff lose control and leave an incriminating message on Bild editor Kai Diekmann's mailbox? What devil drives Ex-BP-boss Tony Hayward to weep in public and say: "I want my old life back!"? "The good Lord is pleased with every child." How does football king Franz Beckenbauer overcome crises with a statement like this, so that even the magazine SPIEGEL states: "The 65 year old is not immune to mistakes but contrary to ordinary mortals, slips leave him unscathed."? Nowhere does communication show true human nature more clearly than in a crisis. The supreme discipline of communication focuses on the behaviour of people in situations of crisis, be it CEO or press officer. But what is the nature of mankind? Several scientific disciplines deal with this riddle - one of these is psychology.

What triggered this study was the observation that in times of crisis, even experienced players often make "inexplicable" errors. Literature on crisis communication offers little help: The often anecdotally explained cases leave open the question as to <u>why</u> well-educated top managers, CEOs and even experienced politicians commit such "inexplicable" errors. Besides approaches from the study of "Human Factors"[i], I have also gathered, some basic insights from psychology such as perception, cognition, emotion, judgement and decision in search of answers to this question.

Many people have misconceptions regarding psychology due to watching crime series on television. Conclusions regarding the practice of crisis communication are presented here without clichés. The psychological processes are of a basic nature, but my recommendations should be weighed up critically before they are accepted. Based on general scientific research, I hereby present my personal conclusions. These are based on analogies and have still to be scientifically reviewed. Apparently, however, some rules of thumb employed by experienced practitioners, who indeed may sometimes rediscover what is already known, are also scientifically deduced, justified and thus confirmed here. The classification is based on the structure of the standard work "Psychology" by Philip Zimbardo und Richard Gerrig[ii]. My conclusions are reflected in a systematic guideline that I use in my own practice. You will find checklists and evidence for quotations,

which are missing here due to lack of space, on my private website www.rudischmidt.eu/2.html.
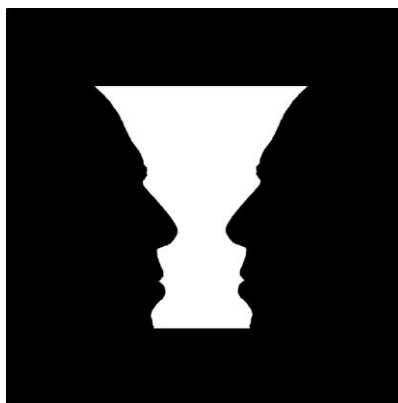
Safe behaviour in a crisis?

A prerequisite for safe human behaviour in crises is that the actors are aware of the situation. Research on human errors in risk situations refers to a trio made up of perception, interpretation and forecast as "situational awareness". High-risk industries such as aerospace, nuclear power, military and medicine show: Human errors often arise from incorrect situation consciousness. There is practically no scientific research about this in communication literature. However, empirical evidence from other areas suggests that mistakes in crisis communication have similar causes.

I Perception and Attention

In the case of some crises, one wonders later: How could the players have overlooked that? Why does one miss so much when it is possible to focus one's attention on other things? In psychology, a distinction is made between target-driven choices and involuntary distraction through external stimuli. You are participating in a press conference for your trade group or party. Suddenly an activist's shrill whistling distracts everyone from the speech. Human perception is organised in such a way that, depending on the situation, new stimuli can attract more attention than conscious control.

Beside attention control, the organisation of perception processes determines what we perceive: Humans organise their sensory impressions in groups. Consider the picture: can/did you see a white vase on a black background or my black silhouette on a white background? What did your perception determine as foreground and background? Is there a "right" or "wrong" interpretation of this picture? Psychology has discovered diverse organisational principles: proximity, similarity, continuity, uniformity and "collective destiny". We automatically group things together if they move in the same direction, look similar or lie close together spatially. Small

interruptions or mistakes are automatically amended so that we perceive the object as a whole. That is why you overlook the typos in your press release. The search for structure in the human brain is a continuous process, regardless whether you are looking at crises, clouds or stellar constellations: For thousands of years and across cultures, humans have added individual points and shapes to a construct. Shape, sequence and completeness have great influence on consideration and association of information. By necessity, we perceive in context and the expectations of the perceiver direct his attention, as you can see here when completing the terms:

- o CAT, MOUSE, •OG
- o LONDON, THAMES, •OG
- o HUNTER, SHOT, •EAR

The first two terms create a context and provoke expectations so that you complete the rows with DOG and FOG. Seen out of context, this would be impossible. And the third line? FEAR or NEAR? Which expectation directs you? Two people do not perceive a situation in the same way. Each person focuses his attention, and thereby the structure of his reality based on his individual general knowledge, his needs and his goals as well as his cultural values and approach.

As humans usually cannot grasp a situation "at a glance", they put it together from spatially and temporally successive perceptions. Should details of the key elements that are already fixed change at some time, this will escape one's attention.

- The constant flow of news often misleads player in a crisis to focussing on trivial details whilst neglecting critical aspects, questions and the overall perspective. Media are also prone to running into this trap.
- Be careful when, how, in which order and to what extent the information reaches you and whether your perception would change if the order had been different.
- Regularly check whether existing data is still accurate and what consequences would result from changes.
- A crisis creates a negative context. Therefore, be very careful to direct expectations by clever use of introductory phrases, signal words etc.

II Learning and Memory

Your organisation is in a crisis. You buy a book on crisis communication to learn how best to react. Psychology interprets learning as a process that leads to changes in behaviour or perception potential and is based on experience[iii]. You have probably already heard of Pavlov's dogs and classical conditioning[iv]. A repeated stimulus makes the behaviour of an organism (human or animal) predictable. Conditioning is diversely present in humans, and often they are unaware of it. Everyday examples are the use of aromas in shops or the shapes of monsters in films or the style of the music that amplify moods and actions. Numerous studies have proven that much of human behaviour can be explained by conditioned learning. Conditioning is not the only way to learn. Other studies demonstrate impressively how human behaviour changes according to the experiences of others – we are able to learn a vast number of behaviour patterns from others in a short space of time. The fundamental learning mechanisms of humans continue to function, even in times of crisis: In every crisis the general public learns something about your organisation and yourself.

- What they learn will determine how the public sees and treats you in the future. Therefore, in a crisis you need to ask yourself: "**What should the people learn about us now?**" The communicator must confront the CEO with this.

- The longer the crisis lasts, the more the negative stimuli add up and this increases the likelihood that an undesirable view is conditioned. Sitting it out also has its price. A quick end reduces the risk of negative conditioning and is sometimes more advantageous than perpetual mudslinging.
- Instead of arguing forever, you will do better to mention examples of similar situations.

Memory

Following a crisis, it is obviously of interest how long people remember negative and undesirable details. Memory is predominantly a combination of implicit and explicit memory use. To recognise something that has already been seen is implicit memory use, the selective retrieval of specific

information is explicit. As a rule, recognition is much easier than retrieval.

Short-term memory

We are at a press conference. What comes into the journalist's mind? The short-term memory effectively contributes only three to five pieces of information to the human memory span. Short-term memory can however be supported by two methods. One of them is repetition ("rehearsal"), for instance when one repeats a telephone number out loud while looking for paper and pen. No reader of your press release will do this. The second is referred to as "chunking" in jargon. A "chunk" is an orientation aid, which adds another meaning with help of similarities or other organisational principles, and binds new information onto existing memory contents. Examples of this are things that are easy to remember such as wedding anniversaries, rhymes, names or birthdays as PC passwords.

> - If your communication includes more than three messages (for instance for legal reasons such as stock company law), use additional techniques such as chunking and priming (see below).
> - Recognition is easier. This is often directed against the brand name of the organisation. Choose a neutral background without your logo for critical statements.

Working memory

Back to the press conference: How do you experience this period of time? There is continuity from moment to moment that is obviously beyond the scope of the short-term memory. Most people hesitate when they are asked: "Which memory do you use during a press conference to draw conclusions, direct attention and understand questions and answers?" Besides short-term and long-term memory, research has found another memory type: The working memory. It is the basis for the flow of thoughts and actions and unifies the individual experiences of the press conference into continuity. Research has revealed evidence of three components of the working memory: one for phonology or language based information, one for visual-spatial information and one that is centrally executive, which directs attention and coordinates the other two components. This is relevant for crisis communication in several respects, because according to my observations, people and organisations in crises tend to process internal information and communication in writing. Findings from general studies on the components of the working memory lead me to the assumption that they run the risk of reducing the situational awareness mentioned at the beginning, by the visual-spatial process of your working memory. Neither is the optical instance of the working memory sufficiently considered in external presentation.

- Always present optical information to the working memory. You can quickly test, for instance on a whiteboard, what will happen when you regroup the data in the presentation.
- When there is absolutely nothing to win, it is not necessary to deliver any additional graphic material for the working memory of the public.
- Don't reduce communication to writing. Address all functions of the working memory with pictures and sound. Rather seek TV coverage than to avoid image communication because of hostile cameras. Don't avoid press releases because of negative press.
- A 1 on 1 live interview can be a powerful form of communication. Example: Chancellor Angela Merkel in September 2011 to Günther Jauch before the parliamentary vote regarding the guarantee of billions of Euros.

Long-term memory

What details can people still remember about the Neue Heimat (new home), Coop and Jürgen Schneider scandals? Does the metaphor "It's all water under the bridge" have some merit? After absorbing information, we begin to forget very quickly in the first week, and thereafter, the curve begins to flatten. During perception, several pieces of information compete with one another to remain in the memory. Furthermore, each piece of memory content overlaps with other contents. This effect is called **interference**. In some settings, pre-existing informational patterns hinder the acquisition of new information. In others, new information interferes with the retention of earlier memory content (in turn "chunking" supports the acquisition of new content by means of existing memory content).

Information will remain in the memory for longer if it is accompanied by important conclusions or knowledge. If the circumstances during recollection are similar to those at the moment of storage, it improves memory performance. The so-called **serial position effect** proves itself in the learning of word lists or reading of passages: The information at the beginning and end is more readily available and has a greater chance of being stored in the long-term memory. Moreover, numerous studies have proven that the first experience with a term or idea prepares the memory for future memorising performance – even if at first, it is not about memorising the term; it is sufficient to have seen it before ("**priming**"). If one compares the power of recognition with a restaurant, the champagne glasses are the short-term memory, the working memory is the gravy bowl and the long-term memory is a well-seasoned earthenware casserole. At the restaurant you begin with the small champagne glass as you enter.

- "No comment" and "we will not comment on rumours" gives others the opportunity to create a mental picture of you in their memories.
- The beginning and the ending of crises remain in the memory longest. At the least, you should influence the ending.
- When bringing forward facts to your discharge, present the three most important ones together with a conclusion in such a way that a recognition effect is created.
- The most important arguments should come at the beginning and at the end. Unfavourable factors

> rather in the middle – unless you are announcing it yourself to forestall a journalist.
>
> - You can at least try to encourage the public to forget negative facts by counteracting it with interfering information.
> - People tend to spend considerable time on justifications. Don't reduce the memorability of your arguments by using too many details; less is more.
> - If an important holiday like Easter or Christmas is close go public seven to nine days before. During this time everything people have a lot to do, and with luck it will be forgotten in a few days.

Memory structures of lawyers and technicians

Numerous studies suggest that the human memory groups experiences in concepts, which in turn are organised into categories. Categories include objects (car, church), activities (cooking, dancing), characteristics (green, clever), abstract terms (creditability, hate) or relationships (more clever than, related to). These categories appear to be hierarchically structured and have main categories and subcategories. Research also shows that in each hierarchy there is always one level according to which people can best categorise and think about objects – the so-called **basic level**. The basic level of experts is more profound than that of laymen. For this reason, what experts say often goes over the heads of journalists and laymen.

> - There is clear scientific evidence that acting outside the base level of recipients creates misunderstanding and rejection. Don't fall into the trap of using specialist jargon. The public target group consists of laymen, not experts.
> - Legal and technical phrases do not meet the basic level of the public.
> - Numerous cases of unsuccessful crisis management are examples of communicating on the wrong level.

Remember = knowledge + reconstruction

Has there been more than one 29th February in the past ten years? Certainly you will be able to answer, even though you hardly remember the last 29th February. In times of crisis especially, it is important that people remember just one thing (research, witness statements etc.). If you think about it you

are often unable to remember it exactly. Instead, you reconstruct information on the basis of a more general form of knowledge. When answering the question about the 29th February you use general memory content to reconstruct the past. People do not only recall specific memories, they reconstruct memory content. This leads to typical distortions such as simplification, highlighting certain details and matching details to the background and knowledge of the one who is remembering. Psychological studies have come to the conclusion that humans cannot refer to "the truth" because the accuracy of memory strongly depends on the context of the retrieved and the stored information. Moreover there is memory content, even of eye-witnesses that is vulnerable to information that is added later. The effect of (subsequent) misinformation gets stronger steadily as the source of the misinformation begins to resemble the original source more and more.

> - Make the dissemination of positive information similar to the dispersal of negative information by third parties.
> - Typical reconstruction distortions of testimonies based on enquiries and reports are examined. Ask journalists to clarify some details of their source. If they do not remember exactly: How reliable are the other details then? Can a scandal that will stand up in court be established? The legal department of the publishing house might be sceptical. In the process, we sometimes learn how much the counterpart really knows.

III Language

"It is already out." What could that mean? The minister is already sitting on the podium of the national press conference. Has her (not yet corrected) press release already gone to the media? You can only know what is meant if you know the context of the statement which consists of circumstances <u>and</u> statement recipients. Studies prove that animals, like people, create their messages in such a way that they would only interest a specific listener. For this to work, the collective background knowledge should correspond sufficiently. Humans evaluate the collective background knowledge mostly according to the following factors:

1. **Group membership**: Members of a group (for example profession or culture) should have some common background knowledge. A Federal President leaves the message *"you are crossing the Rubicon"* on the mailbox of an editor in chief. Literally this means that the journalist has crossed a river. To understand the true meaning, one has to know the underlying metaphor. Within a specific culture, the speaker takes this for granted.

2. **Linguistic co-presence**: Participants in a discussion assume that information that has already been discussed or is currently being discussed is collective background knowledge. Teachers and parents of pubescent children might occasionally doubt the validity of this.

3. **Physical co-presence** occurs when the speaker and listener find themselves in a mutual situation.

In search of the meaning

Where does the meaning of language lie? Certainly, understanding what is said is part of it. Experiments show that people often remember the meaning of statements but seldom remember the exact wording. Listeners fill information gaps by using logical assumptions in conjunction with the context: *"I am going to Ms. Merkel's press conference. Maybe she will comment on Christian Wulff."* The listener has to extrapolate, whom the speaker is referring to as "Ms. Merkel", "she" and "Christian Wulff" and what a press conference has to do with a comment. A journalist, who makes such statements, expects his colleagues to understand him.

- Pay attention to the role of information gaps as well as the way listeners fill them. Consider the (limited) collective background knowledge that the public shares with you. Is it more than then morals and ethics of the country's culture? Outsiders usually don't have the same expertise as you and your colleagues.
- The audience is looking for meaning not hair-splitting details. Before you coordinate internally and discuss the wording, agree on meaning and content.
- In practice, background knowledge is of high tactical importance. A press release, conference or a 1 to 1 discussion with a journalist? In the press conference it is almost impossible to be certain whether everyone understands what is being said. Therefore

in certain circumstances one may be better off with the 1 to 1 discussion because this enables the elimination of misunderstandings via a questions and answer session.

IV Problem Solving and Logical Thinking

Crisis communication studies often report how management solves problems. Normally, tasks are solved by combining current data with information from the memory. Often we already know something but we need more information and have to find a way to get it. It is clear why basic processes of problem solving are relevant for crisis communication. Acquiring information is an essential feature of journalistic research and a basis for planned crisis communication. Remarkably enough, crisis communication advisors are seldom concerned about the question of how the two parties recognise and process information gaps in a crisis.

Basic research describes problem solving processes with the help of a "problem space", which is defined by the initial state and target state as well as the actions which change the situation from one position to the other. This is reminiscent of the initially presented research triad on human errors in risk situations: perception + interpretation + forecast = situational awareness. Hundreds of studies show how often the seed of failure is already planted at the beginning, because one of the elements in the problem space is unclear. Even with a clear initial and target state, it is difficult to find the target: the multitude of factors and resulting combinations by far exceed human capability. Dietrich Dörner offers an overview that is comprehensible to laymen: "The logic of failure[v]". In crisis communication it is more applicable than ever, that neither the initial nor the target state is clear. I therefore assume that many cases of unsuccessful crisis communication can be ascribed to insufficient clarification of the problem space.

- "Muddling through" is risky. Carefully consider the description of the situation to ensure a good basis for the information. First define the explicit goals, then start planning.
- In times of "peace" prepare a special checklist for analysing typical situations in your industry.
- Do all underlying assumptions really exist? Will a new description influence the situation and what

> mechanisms and rules apply? Are there other ways
> to describe the situation and solutions?

V Judgement and Decision

Every decision-maker has a fundamental problem. Future developments are still unknown, data relevant to past situations is incomplete and the evaluation of situations is individual and subjective. It is never clear whether a judgment or a decision was correct. Time for consideration is usually limited in a crisis. What is the best way to reach a decision? Throw the dice? Mathematics? Business economics? A look into the German standard reference on business economics (Wöhe: "Einführung in die Allgemeine Betriebswirtschaftslehre" 24th edition(*Introduction to general business studies*),) illustrates the decision-making theory in which many managers who take action in a crisis are trained. It analyses decision-making errors, action space, state space and result space and results in a decision-making matrix. Expectation values and risk tendencies evaluate the alternatives with principles and rules such as according to Bayes, Bernoulli, Laplace, Minimax, Hurwicz etc. Is this the practice on capital markets, such as in stock trading? In the last decades there have been many upheavals. How could this be? After all, capital market pros and accountants assess the situation "rationally". Not least in the view of overwhelming empiricism (stock market crashes, failed M&As, and the recent state debt crisis) economic sciences have developed an economic psychological approach, at least for the stock exchange, with "Behavioural Finance". It is scientifically and empirically evident that: "Both in the study of individual decisions…but also in the examination of decisions in groups and organisations, the observations of the behaviour differ from the postulates of the Homo oeconomicus theory."Brand loyalty with consumers, as with professionals, leads to sub optimal decision making. Measures of sales and trade promotions are based on practical applications of social-psychological findings. Human resources management finds personality differences in the workforce and leadership personalities and styles. It discusses topics such as motivation

or working environment. At the level of the national economy, psychological effects are found in cases of money, inflation and currency changes (complementary currencies, D-Mark/DDR, Euro introduction). Obviously in everyday life, where constant, fast judgements and decisions are needed people act in a different way than Homo oconomicus. **This leads to the heretical question: Why is there no scientifically based Behavioural Crisis Communication?** Obviously human judgments are based mostly on rules of thumb - even in the business world. These heuristics, a type of mental formula, reduce the complexity and deliver quick solutions. The grand masters of chess mostly cope with complexity by employing learnt patterns (Rudi Schmidt: "Urteil und Plan in der Krisenkommunikation" (Judgement and Plan in Crisis Communication), Pressesprecher, 08/2011). While scientists like Dietrich Dörner impressively show failure of rules of thumb in complex situations, the studies of Gerd Gigerenzer demonstrate the equally remarkable "Power of intuition" (Gut Instinct). Rules of thumb seem to deliver good results in standard situations; in other situations they deliver incorrect decisions or no decisions at all. Then the attention must be focussed on the conscious processing of information; this in turn increases the risk of overlooking the essential[vi]. As hardly any press officers have to deal with crises permanently, only few get enough practice to develop appropriate patterns. Psychology has identified several general heuristics, which "automatically" control human actions, these include: reciprocity, consistence (cognitive dissonance), social acceptance, sympathy, authority and lack. Three of these will be addressed here.

Availability heuristics: Humans focus their judgement according to how (readily) information is available in the memory ("appears familiar"). Errors can occur when the memory isn't accurate or when the memory content comes from a unilateral sample or is otherwise influenced. Studies show that the current mood of the subject group favours information that matches what they remember. The availability, distorted in this way, influences the decision of the subject group.

Representative heuristics: When an object has properties, which are typical for items in a certain category, people assume that this object also belongs in this category, they therefore judge similar-looking circumstances based on previous information. If this premise matches, it usually leads to acceptable judgements. However, representation may also

be misleading if other important information is dismissed as "atypical".

Anchor heuristics (contrast): A person strongly bases his judgements on a starting point, even if this has little or no informational value. Numerous prominent studies have proven this in the case of sensory judgments (such as temperature, weight, size, taste) but also for cognitive, social, or other assessments: In the context of a study in London, around 300 fund managers were to guess whether there were more or less doctors in London than the last four digits of their own telephone numbers. Fund managers whose phone numbers ended on a number greater than 7000 guessed the number of doctors on average to be 8000, the ones with final digits of less than 3000, on average, guessed the number of doctors in London to be 4000.

- Because anchor heuristics is extremely effective, it often determines the outcome at the beginning of the crisis: Who and what determine the anchors via the output information? If reporting inevitable, should you consider informing the public so that you are able to have an influence on the forming of the anchor?
- Because moods influence the accessibility of memory content, the CEO (or supervisory board) and the communicator must question whether affected people should also be represented in the crisis committee.
- What experiences and patterns does the crisis committee need from its members?
- When dealing with important questions, check whether the representation or anchor could distort the assessment.
- Browse archives for similar exemplary cases from other countries and industries.
- Consider increasing the complexity for "opponents" (media or actors who use them)– for example, by a second theme.

Psychology of decision-making

Suppose you were chief editor of SPIEGEL magazine for one issue. You earmark the Christmas and Easter issues. Which issue would you choose? Months later, Christmas and Easter are still reserved. But the editorial office cannot hold both reservations any longer and requests that you release one of the alternatives. Which one would you give up?

These two questions should get identical answers. But in fact, the decision-making behaviour of the subjects of this

experiment varies significantly. If a certain alternative is favoured, the positive aspects are given more consideration. If one is rejected, the negative features shift into the focus. The wording of a question has been proven to influence the decision. Moreover, when making an evaluation, people take their expectation as the reference point. Suppose you could be head of a department for one issue of the SPIEGEL magazine. If you have never had an offer before, you will probably evaluate this as positive. But if you had previously been offered the role of chief editor, you would be disappointed (with the same offer). Studies on decision-making in oncological therapy show how powerful the **"framing"** effect is: Imagine you had lung cancer and a choice between surgery and radiation. You are given the following (not real!) statistics:

Option A: 68 out of 100 patients live for one year after the operation. After five years 34 are still alive. 77 out of 100 patients live for one year after radiation. After five years 22 are still alive.

Option B: 32 out of 100 patients are dead one year after the operation. After five years 66 patients have died. 23 out of 100 patients are dead one year after radiation. After five years 78 patients have died.

The probabilities are identical - the only difference is the description: The chance of survival or death. In experiments, 18 percent choose radiation when survival chances are described, and with the description of death, it is more than double at 44 percent. This result occurred with most varied test subjects, even among experienced health professionals (McNeil et al., 1982).

- The beginning (which is often your reaction time) often determines the success of crisis communication, because framing and anchor heuristics are highly effective and usually initially defined: Who and what decides the outline information beforehand? In addition there is the serial position effect. Is reporting inevitable? If so you should consider being the first to go public to define the framing and anchor for yourself. If you have a time advantage, you can use it for this.
- Framing also affects the view of an "objective" decision-making matrix. Therefore, you should present the alternatives in both a win and a lose frame.
- If you want to understand the actions of others, find out how the decision was framed.

- The difference between success and failure can depend merely on the framing: Should you describe the survival rate or the death rate?

Emotions and stress

Anybody who has already experienced a crisis knows all about emotions and stress. Emotions are characterised as short-lived, intensive physiological arousal, cognitive evaluation and behaviour as a reaction to important situations. All humans appear to have a fundamental repertoire of seven emotions in common: The facial expressions of joy, surprise, anger, disgust, fear, grief and contempt are understood and demonstrated worldwide. Emotions influence the cognitive functions and play a role in determining what people pay attention to, how they perceive themselves and others and how they interpret and remember characteristics of life situations. Studies have shown the significant influence this has on judgments and conclusions. Positive emotions and moods improve efficiency and creativity of thinking power.

Organisms react to stimuli with stress that destroys their balance and creates a need to overcome the disturbance. Stress reactions are often a mixture of physiological, emotional, cognitive and behavioural patterns. Heads of organisations usually interpret negative media reporting as dangerous. People react to danger physiologically; it triggers a series of complex activities in the nerves and glands that prepare the organism for fight or flight. The physical implementation of this strategy is impossible in office life, for instance in a press conference. Nevertheless, the body goes through three physiological phrases during stress: Alarm, resistance and exhaustion. If the body is stressed over a longer period of time, the body functions, such as the immune system or regeneration, are at risk due to an increased production of certain hormones and their combinations. According to my observations, in crises that last longer than two weeks (e.g. court cases, epidemics, accidents) this leads to an increased probability of errors by management, communicators and journalists.

In contrast to the largely autonomous physical stress reactions, many psychological reactions are learnt. They depend on the perception and interpretation of the situation. The degree of stress in typical important events in people's lives has been properly researched e.g. Social Readjustment Rating Scale by Holmes & Rahe (1967) and later Miller & Rahe (1997). So far it appears that inadequate research has been done with regard to players involved in public crises. Therefore, it is unknown

what type of publicity or crisis communication in the life of a manager, a politician or a communicator corresponds to which life event on the scale. Research basically shows that negative events that are beyond control, unpredictable or ambiguous create exceptional amounts of stress. Crises usually have all of these features; moreover the decision-makers are often threatened by drastic consequences. This leads me to believe that in such situations, the player's burden at that moment often corresponds to life events (according to Holmes, Rahe and Miller) such as dismissal, pregnancy, sexual problems, significant changes in income, change of supervisor or death of a close friend. In extreme situations, it can even be compared with severe life events, such as death of a spouse, divorce, imprisonment, serious personal injury or illness.

> Therefore, the CEO or supervisory board must ask himself the question:
> - Should one transfer the responsibility in a crisis only to people who are personally affected and under extreme stress? How do you expect to reach good decisions when the actors are in a physical and psychological state of emergency?
> - How do we prevent inopportune stress automation and avoid mistakes made under stress?
> - Who establishes appropriate counter-measures?

Psychology identifies strategies for overcoming stress as "coping". Numerous studies show: The cognitive assessment of stress factors alone plays a remarkable role. My portfolio of cases (approx. 20 to 30 cases annually since 2006) indicates that organisations in crisis hardly ever make provision for mistakes made under stress. Two possibilities for coping with stress have been identified: tackle the problem directly or overcome the emotions involved. Problem-oriented strategies help when stress factors can be controlled (rescue work, recalls). Emotion-oriented coping is advisable when stress factors are uncontrollable and need to be dealt with (investigation committees, accidents). Often, a mixture of stress factors is present and appropriate problem-oriented measures are omitted because the actors are, in part, emotionally overwhelmed. In the light of this empirical evidence it seems likely that inappropriate emotional stress-coping leads single or multiple players to committing the "inexplicable" communication errors and this not only in the event of catastrophes, in which those responsible must also deal with equally strong emotions on the side of the victims or their relatives.

Coping and social support

Social support strategies are available as compensation for limited emotion-oriented coping. Research shows that social support has potential. Solidarity and appreciation help players to cope with stress factors that cannot be approached by direct problem solving.

- As the problem of coping with stress is often overlooked, top management of an organisation should provide social support (e.g. coaching)
- The players should determine the form for themselves in order to avoid additional stress from unwanted support.
- During the hot phase, a daily assembly in the evening (as opposed to the morning): NOW the day draws to an end, the night is IMPORTANT for regeneration, there will be NO FURTHER disturbing interaction. There will be people on call to cover the night.
- Provide adequate equipment and a good professional atmosphere.
- Realistically, in crises that last longer than two weeks, the crisis committee needs double staffing (and a system to avoid handover mistakes) as well as extra resources for everyday tasks.

Structure of the social reality

Everyone is familiar with controversial football games, parliamentary debates, TV debates between chancellery candidates. Why do surveys show that not all spectators have a clear winner in mind? Why do fans judge a football game so differently? Socio-psychological studies lead to the conclusion that complex social events cannot be observed objectively. Observers select the events instinctively: What do I expect to see? What do I want to see? As already shown in some parts of this work, people use prior knowledge and context to interpret ambiguous objects; social awareness, which judges and classifies the actions of others (is the person or the situation the reason?) works in the same way.

The fundamental attribution error

As research shows, people tend to attribute the responsibility to the players whilst underestimating the circumstances. This tendency is so extremely distinctive that science has developed a special term for it: Fundamental attribution error. There is

evidence that this effect occurs more in Western societies, where a different perception of self prevails. There is an interesting study by Menon (et al, 1999.) among the many supporting documents: In this study, U.S. and Japanese newspaper reports were analysed based on an event in the finance industry. American journalists tended to blame the people involved more, while the Japanese press analysed situational reasons. This study shows internationally acting communicators how the media delivers and preserves cultural attribution styles.

The distortion of "I"

The fundamental attribution error slips in even when assessing one's own person. Most people distort their judgement of themselves in their favour. They would rather attribute success to themselves; failures tend to be caused by other reasons. People also show this tendency as members of a group: It is more probable that they attribute successes of the group to themselves and failures to other members of the group. Studies suggest that this effect can be increased, depending on the issue and whether those affected are male or female.

Expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies

Over time, the fundamental attribution error can distort important "certainties" and expectations in the construction of the social reality, so that when people behave in a certain way towards others, the expected results occur. Other people confronted with an expectation in this way, tend to behave as expected. The fundamental attribution error influences the responsible person in the organisation to quickly prejudge the public while underestimating external factors. The responsible persons are often surprised and overwhelmed by this and feel unfairly treated. Conversely, they also tend to underestimate their own responsibility.

- Prior to taking critical steps, external influences should be the subject of an open discussion, before your organisation draws any consequences.
- Relevant critical players may behave in such a way in a crisis, that their negative attitude leads to (expected) misconduct on the part of your organisation. Depending on the position with regard to politicians and regulating authorities, a vicious circle threatens.
- Continuous criticism increases the danger of actually behaving inappropriately at some point.

VI Persuasion and Influence

The main goal of crisis communication is often to influence attitudes and actions. The behaviour of people cannot be precisely predicted by their attitude, however research shows that the availability of an attitude is a good indicator for the prediction of behaviour. An attitude is readily available when it results from direct experience (such as embedded journalists), and if the behaviour and attitude is repeated often it will correspond with the characteristics. Studies show two methods of persuasion by means of changes of attitude - the so-called "central" and "peripheral routes". The "central route" describes the situation where a person weighs up the pros and cons extremely carefully. Only serious reasons and arguments change his attitude. The so-called peripheral route characterises a constellation in which one only reflects information and messages superficially.

> - Organisations in a crisis situation tend to use profound arguments. However, crises hardly ever consist of rational elements. The affective dominate and often the public only listens superficially.
> - If this factor is ignored in the communication, it misses the public and thereby your goal. Follow your heart and gut instinct.

The 1 on 1 duel
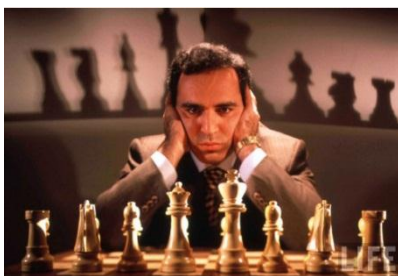
A communicator must be methodically prepared for a classic scenario: A journalist's enquiry or research for the purposes of an exclusive story. Since the 1970's, psychologists have made enormous progress in explaining how processes of persuasion, action and decision-making work. The principles of reciprocity, consistence (cognitive dissonance), social proof, sympathy, authority and lack in particular, have emerged. The number of studies carried out in this area is noteworthy. Some leading scientists (including Ariely, Cialdini, Dörner, Gigerenzer) have created a high level of awareness through additional

publications[vii] suitable for the layman. Next year I plan to publish a work entitled "Psychology of the Exclusive Story".

> • Literature on crisis communication hardly considers the 1 on 1 constellation. The works of Cialdini ("Psychology of Persuasion", 2010) seem to be exceptionally useful.
> • Tactically the well structured, scientific Russian chess psychology helps, and it makes similar recommendations as literature on police science[viii].

Social group processes, society and culture

What is the social role of your organisation and what is the role of the media? How do the social roles of your colleagues differ? Is the difference between a legal advisor and chief financial officer smaller than that between sales director and head of communication? A social role is a behaviour pattern that is expected from people who find themselves in a particular environment. Different social situations provide different social roles and make behaviour appropriate or inappropriate. People apply different rules to friends and public officials. Groups and societies develop social norms; expectations, such has how their members should behave. Norms reduce the complexity and facilitate mutual interactions. We know how others behave, and we recognise tolerance limits and the consequences of violating social norms.

> • Due to different group concepts the broader public experiences bonus systems on the financial market or pension regulations for civil servants and politicians as inappropriate. To those who are socialised as members of this system, it appears normal.
> • This phenomenon reminds one of the different basic levels. Successful crisis communication means: The actions of the organisation must be kept in line with the social norms of the target group being addressed.

Conclusion

Does central recognition exist? Yes: crisis communication means bringing the communication, behaviour and appearance of an organisation into reasonable harmony with the context of the environment. The context runs as a recurring theme, like

a thread through the various psychological disciplines and cannot be ignored. If you fail to bring the context, with which the public identifies your organisation, in line with the expectations of the public, your crisis communication will fail. If you succeed, the crisis will be quickly forgotten.

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[i] **Badke-Schaub, Hofinger, Lauche**: Human Factors. Psychology of Safe Actions in Risk Industries. 2nd edition. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2011 as well as St. Pierre, Hofinger, Buerschaper: Emergency Management. Human Factors and Patient Safety in Urgent Medicine. 2. Auflage. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2011.

[ii] **Philip Zimbardo, Richard Gerrig**: Psychology. 18th edition. Munich: Pearson, 2008, pg. 2.

[iii] **Philip Zimbardo, Richard Gerrig**: a. a. O. S. 192+193.

[iv] Pavlov was initially interested in digestive glands, which got him the Nobel Prize for psychology and medicine in 1904. Within this work he discovered classic conditioning in his experimental animals.

[v] **Dietrich Dörner**: The Logic of Failure. Strategic Thinking in Complex Situations. 10th edition. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2011.

[vi] **Badke-Schaub, Hofinger, Lauche**: a. a. O., S. 70.

[vii] **Dan Ariely**: Thinking helps, but there are no benefits. Why do we repeatedly make irrational decisions. Munich: Droemer Verlag, 2008; **Badke-Schaub, Hofinger, Lauche**: a. a. O.; **Robert Cialdini**: Psychology of Persuasion. 6th edition. Bern: Verlag Hans Huber, 2010; **Dietrich Dörner**: a. a. O.; **Gerd Gigerenzer**: Gut Feelings. The Intelligence of the Unconscious and the Power of Intuition. 7th edition. Munich: Goldmann Verlag, 2008.

[viii] **Nikolai Krogius**: Psychology in Chess. Berlin (Ost): Sportverlag, 1983; **Rudi Schmidt**: a. a. O.