

## **OBTC 2017 at Providence College June 14<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

### 1) Title, Abstract & Keywords

*In your abstract, please include a brief session description (not to exceed 100 words), and three to four keywords. If your proposal is accepted, this description will be printed in the conference program.*

**“The noose: A case study in institutional miscommunication”**

When racial symbols appear on campuses, college administrators often experience a panic that outpaces their reactions to natural disasters or armed attacks. While this may be due to the latter two phenomena becoming more frequent in the US, thus engendering a more laissez faire attitude, anti-black aggression and the associated triggers appear to evoke leadership consternation and communication responses that can be perceived as more harmful than the originating event. In this case study demonstration, we invite consideration of the factors that may underpin universities’ crisis management racially-initiated reactions with an eye toward developing more appropriate communication-based plans of action.

Key words: institutional communications, micro-invalidating, race, unintended bias

### 2) Teaching Implications:

*What is the contribution of your session to management pedagogy/andragogy? Specifically, please include your learning objectives, and describe what management and/or teaching topics are relevant to your session, and why. Also, include theoretical, disciplinary, or theoretical foundations that will help reviewers understand how your ideas fit within the broader field of management.*

#### Summary of Contribution

This exercise leverages information associated with a university’s response to the unexpected and widespread electronic circulation of a photograph depicting a black, male student with a rope around his neck, his head tilted to the side and his tongue hanging out, while the noose was held aloft by an Asian female student, standing on a box. After being transmitted by another student from the room in which the picture was taken, this disquieting image was sent to various undergraduates until it reached one student, who was participating in a Black

Student Union (BSU) meeting. After its circulation at the BSU session, the photo went viral on social media, finally coming to the attention of university administrators later that same evening.

This case-based exercise allows students to (1) quickly compare university leadership's initial and final communications, (2) note elements of the comparative responses that either alleviated or further exacerbated the emerging communication crisis, and (3) suggest alternative messages that might have led to more positive and inclusive student impacts. Given distance from the triggering events, the exercise invites students to apply what they have learned about effective communication to a crisis management situation within the relatively safe confines of a classroom. Many dimensions and approaches may be brought to bear on issues around diversity and inclusion, and the times we live in make all of these very important. This exercise focuses on developing and allowing students to apply critical analysis and strategy skills, and fits a broad range of courses in the management area at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Learning Objectives:

1. Identify common institutional leadership communication challenges that arise in times of crisis.
2. Examine the ways institutions may exhibit unintended bias in their crisis communications.
3. Critically evaluate effective institutional crisis-related approaches to communications in response to on-campus racial incidents.

Background

Identity, self-definition and micro-invalidations

Psychologists most commonly use the word "identity" to describe the individually-related idiosyncratic characteristics that make a person unique (Erikson, 1994). The Psychology Dictionary defines racial identity as "an individual's sense of having their identity defined by belonging to a particular race or ethnic group. The strength of such identity is dependent on how much he or she has processed and internalized the sociological, political and other contextual factors within that group." (Pam, 2016). The internalization process referenced in this definition is often what researchers indicate distinguishes "identification" from "identity".

Erikson's (1994) central idea is that any individual's sense of identity is determined in large part by explorations and commitments that he or she undertakes regarding certain personal and social traits. The core of the research in this paradigm investigates the extent to which a person has conducted this internal examination as well as the degree to which he or she displays an identity commitment as a result. Again, Erikson (1994) found that four possible permutations result from this exploration and commitment: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. Depending upon both exploration and commitment, dissonance may exist between an individual's self-identification and their external phenotype as evaluated by external others; this is typically a matter of personal resolution, not public community discussion (Laster-Pirtle & Brown, 2015).

A review of the communications surrounding the described incident reveal racial cognitive dissonance, primarily as a result of the narrative put forth by the university's administration (McGirt, 2016). As external others viewed the photograph of the noosed male, what they saw was a person who looked to be of African descent – in essence, black. The institutional explanation in the second referenced memorandum, however, was that the individual in question, “is *perceived* as African American and *self-identifies* as half black” (emphasis added). This particular wording can be seen as a classic example of a racial micro-invalidations: racial micro-invalidations have been defined as communications that “exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential realities of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007: 274). Potentially, in an effort to be politically correct and reflect the student's self-identification stage of development as a potential explanation as to why the individual might participate in a self-harming and provocative activity, the institution unwittingly added further insult to injury within its general community (Franco & Franco, 2016).

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2013). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. John Wiley & Sons.

Cornelissen, J. P., Durand, R., Fiss, P.C., Lammers, J. C., & Vaara, E. (2015). Putting communication front and center in institutional theory and analysis. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(1): 10-27.

Erikson, E. H. (1994). *Identity and the life cycle*. WW Norton & Company.

Franco, M. G. & Franco, S. A. (2016). Impact of identity invalidation for Black multiracial people: The importance of race of perpetrator *Journal of Black Psychology*, 42: 530-548.

Laster-Pirtle, W.N. & Brown, T. N. (2016). Reevaluation of the Influence of appearance and reflected appraisals for mixed-race identity: The role of consistent inconsistent racial perception *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 2: 569-583.

McGirt, E. (2016). Fortune Race Ahead, Culture and Diversity in Corporate America, December 20, 2016.

Pam, (2016). What is racial identity? *Psychology Dictionary*. Obtained 12/8/2016 from <http://psychologydictionary.org/racial-identity/>.

Smooth, J. (2015). *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race*. Obtained 01/10/2017 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU>

Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J.M., Holder, A.M.B., Nadal, K.L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4): 271-286.

### 3) Session Description and Plan:

*What will you actually do in this session? If appropriate, please include a timeline estimating the activities will you facilitate: how long will they take, and how will participants be involved? Please remember that reviewers will be evaluating how well the time request matches the activities you'd like to do, and the extent you can reasonably accomplish the session's goals. Reviewers will also be looking for how you are engaging the participants in the session.*

For demonstration purposes, this exercise can be made to fit a 35-45 minute presentation slot. If a 60 minute time slot is granted, a more complete and richer discussion of how this case exercise could be used in class will be possible.

### Pre-Exercise Setup

Materials needed:

- Copies of the complete two university memos (see attachment).
- Powerpoint summary of key phrases from the two university notifications (sample attached).
- Index cards for final debrief.

The instructor/facilitator should assure that participants have had a chance to review some model of the communication from the literature, whether a credible on-line source (Smooth, 2015), published book or article (Cornelissen et al., 2015; McGirt, 2016), or relevant material from a course text (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Students will be examining in considerable detail their processes of encoding and decoding messages during communication.

### Facilitating the Exercise (3-5 minutes individual reading; 35-40 minute discussion)

1. Depending upon the size of the group, the instructor/facilitator should ask participants to divide themselves into groups of no more than 5-6 individuals. Everyone should be asked to silently read the two university memos.
2. A PowerPoint slide of segments from the first memorandum should be posted and copies of the discussion questions related to the first memo should be distributed. Participants should engage in a self-facilitated discussion of the two debrief questions (15-20 minutes).
3. A PowerPoint slide of segments from the second memorandum should be posted and copies of the discussion questions related to the second memo should be distributed. Participants should engage in a self-facilitated discussion of the four debrief questions (20-25 minutes).
4. Participants should be invited to engage in a short large group discussion about reactions to the issues raised by question 4 (second memorandum) and key communication enhancement suggestions. At exercise conclusion, participants should be asked to take 5 minutes to note suggestions, reactions on an index card for exercise instructional enhancements.

Debrief questions:

Considering the first memorandum, potential discussion questions include:

1. The campus-wide memorandum referenced a “disturbing photo”. Do you believe this was a useful description for the institution to include in its first notice? Why or why not?
2. What assumptions appear to have governed the university’s initial memorandum as it relates to omitting a more detailed description about the specifics of the incident, the ethnicities of those involved, etc.? Do you believe these assumptions were appropriate, given the situation? Why or why not?

Considering the second memorandum, potential discussion questions include:

1. What assumptions appear to have led university leadership to include such language as “the subject was ‘perceived’ as African American but was actually only ‘half black’” in their final note? Do you believe these assumptions were appropriate? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think administrators believed including such ill-defined terms as “perceived”, “self-identifies” and “half-black” would enhance their community notifications? Do you agree or disagree with their assessment? Why?
3. Why do you think the student’s self-identification, which normally would be considered a personal and relatively private matter, was used by university administrators to explain either individual intent or subsequent community impact? Do you agree or disagree with this strategy?
4. What strategies would you suggest university institutions use to provide a more supportive student-centered approach to the issues raised by this incident?

4) Application to Conference theme:

How does your session fit with the overall OBTC theme of *Navigating the Changing Currents*?

The theme, “Navigating the Changing Currents”, brings to mind how our world continues to face rapid change. Some this effect is due to shifting demographics and the rest is due to the tremendous shockwaves sent through all corners of the international community as a result of the 2016 US presidential election. In order to prepare our students for the increasing daily communication challenges associated with the growing relevance of diversity, inclusion and cultural competence, we offer this exercise as an opportunity to help make our OB and management classrooms places where students can become more intentionally insightful regarding their analysis of leadership communications as racial incidents become more common on college campuses.

5) Unique Contribution to OBTC:

*Have you presented the work in this proposal before? If so, how will it be different? Is this proposal under current review somewhere else? If so, please explain. How will your proposal be different for the OBTC conference?*

This exercise was presented in a doctoral/masters class in a session discussing university-related communications and diversity issues. We intend to use the peer comments we receive at the OBTC conference to further develop the exercise for submission to MTR.

## **APPENDIX – UNIVERSITY MEMO 1**

### **University-wide memorandum dated October 5, 2016**

From: Office of the Provost

Dear Community,

Last night, members of our community reported seeing a disturbing photograph that was apparently taken in one of our residence halls and shared electronically. The photograph was subsequently shared (also electronically) with some students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

Regardless of the intent of the individuals photographed (or that of the photographer and others who may have been present), the image is unacceptable and an affront to what we stand for as a community guided by our mission and values.

The image has also triggered hurt and anger among many members of our community. As members of the Student Life staff and the university's Bias Education Response Team actively review the facts associated with this incident, please be aware that there is a great deal we do not yet know.

Nevertheless, the photograph is a reminder of how images and actions can have enormous impact and can cause profound distress — emotionally and physically — to those who have experienced cruelty, violence, trauma, and injustice.

It is an image that calls us to remember our obligations to each other and to treat all with respect and dignity.

For any member of the XXXcommunity who has been affected by this image, we remind you of resources and support available on campus. Students may contact the Counseling and Psychological Services Center located in XXX. Public Safety will be able to get you in contact with an on-call staff member after business hours.

Faculty and staff members may contact CONCERN, the university's employee assistance program, at XXX.

Additionally, University Ministry support services are available to all community members by calling XXX.

We will keep you informed about upcoming opportunities for us to come together as a community.

Very truly yours,



## **APPENDIX – UNIVERSITY MEMO 2**

### **University-wide memorandum from the Office of the Provost dated October 12, 2016**

Dear Community,

We write to provide you with a more complete explanation of the Bias Education and Resource Team's (BERT) role on our campus, provide further details about the recently circulated, racially charged photograph and related emails, and to invite you to participate in a community conversation next Wednesday, Oct. 19.

What is BERT?

The intent of the Bias Education and Resource Team is to educate the community and support those who experience bias and harassment.

Background

On Oct. 5, BERT received a report stating a photograph was taken in a residence hall showing a female Asian Pacific Islander student holding a rope around the neck of a male student who is perceived as African American and self-identifies as half black. The photo was taken by a white male student who sent the photo to his roommate, an African American male student. The student who received the photo then shared it in hopes of seeking support and starting a conversation about its impact. Through meeting with these students involved with the photo, and discussing what took place, we sincerely believe the students in the photo did not have malicious intent. However, this does not negate the impact of the photo.

Update

From our many conversations, meetings, and social media interactions with members of our community, we know this photograph has sparked a variety of emotions. This photograph conjures a history of racism, acts of intimidation, and terror experienced by African Americans. It has triggered a range of feelings, including hurt, anger, and a deep sense of frustration for our black and African American community, as well as the larger campus community.

We have received feedback from students, staff, and faculty that the initial campus-wide email sent on Oct. 5 by administration created significant negative impact. The email caused additional hurt and feelings of marginalization within the black and African American community by not describing the photo or identifying this community as being

directly impacted by the content of the photo. The vagueness of the email also created greater confusion and anxiety for the broader campus community.

The administration takes accountability for the hurtful impact the communication caused. We are committed to: creating spaces to gain a deeper awareness of our impact; engaging in both personal and institutional knowledge and skill development to address bias on our campus; and working in partnership to meet the needs of those most marginalized in our community.

As part of meeting this commitment, we are hosting a space for further community discussion. This community conversation is an opportunity to listen to one another and collectively identify the next steps necessary to help heal our campus community.

We encourage all to attend as we strive to make the environment one that is more inclusive, merciful, just, and respectful of everyone.

Sincerely,

## APPENDIX – Powerpoint Sample of Key phrases from University Memorandum 1

...**a disturbing photograph** that was apparently taken in one of our residence halls and shared electronically. The photograph was subsequently shared (also electronically) with some students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

**Regardless of the intent** of the individuals photographed (or that of the photographer and others who may have been present), **the image is unacceptable** and an affront to what we stand for as a community guided by our mission and values.

The image has also **triggered hurt and anger** among many members of our community. As ...the university's Bias Education Response Team actively review the facts associated with this incident, please be aware that there is a great deal we do not yet know.

Nevertheless, **the photograph is a reminder of how images and actions can have enormous impact and can cause profound distress** — emotionally and physically — to those who have experienced cruelty, violence, trauma, and injustice.

APPENDIX – Powerpoint Sample of Key phrases from University Memorandum 2

... received a report stating a **photograph was taken in a residence hall** showing a **female Asian Pacific Islander student holding a rope around the neck of a male student who is perceived as African American and self-identifies as half black**. The photo was taken by a white male student who sent the photo to his roommate, an African American male student. The student who received the photo then **shared it in hopes of seeking support and starting a conversation about its impact**. Through meeting with these students involved with the photo, and discussing what took place, **we sincerely believe the students in the photo did not have malicious intent**. However, this does not negate the impact of the photo.