



Teaching Conference for
Management Educators

**OBTC 2017 at Providence College
June 14th – 17th, 2017**

SUBMISSION

2017 OBTC Teaching Conference for Management Educators

1) Title, Abstract & Keywords

TITLE: Top Management Team in Crisis: An Experiential Exercise Focused on Communication Skills

ABSTRACT: This session will demonstrate a group role-play exercise that engages participants in group information sharing, group decision-making, internal messaging and external press releases, social media management, and on-camera press conference presence. The exercise is designed to teach strategic management crisis communication skills relating to a public accusation of sexual harassment. The top management team must react immediately using different communication channels. Time pressure is extreme, and consequences are severe. Scenario information and full role-cards will be distributed to session participants.

KEY WORDS: Top management team, team dynamics, crisis communication, role-play

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.

Managerial communication is a common topic in undergraduate, graduate, and executive programs. The exercise presented in this session was initially designed for an executive leadership program, but it can be used at any level of management education. The exercise allows participants the opportunity to develop empathy for different organizational stakeholders and practice different communication skills necessary for group decision-making and effective crisis management for internal and external audiences. Professionals recommend that organizations have a crisis communication plan in the event of... a crisis. Recent articles providing advice in the area of crisis communication refer to events that present imminent physical harm to stakeholders, e.g., extreme weather or violence ("Communication in times of crisis," 2016; Hoffman, 2007; Parsi, 2016). However, harassment also needs to be handled with urgency and care or an organization could face long-term financial and production related consequences to a loss in public image (Dunn & Cody, 2000). Before leaders realize their mistakes, employees may quit and customers, partners, and shareholders may pull their financial support.

This group exercise was designed to practice crisis communication skills. It should be used to complement course discussions on best practices and planning. Using role-play, participants assume a role in a top management team (TMT) that must respond to a

public accusation of sexual harassment. The exercise as originally designed has participants meeting first as a TMT to share information and process through a group decision regarding a shared organizational position. Next, within four station rotations, TMTs are forced to engage with different audiences using select communication media (memorandums/emails, press-releases, twitter, and a press conference). They must practice how to strategically respond to crisis in a very short amount of time (only 15-18 minutes per station).

Although not all TMTs act like a “team,” they are powerful strategic decision-making groups that affect the livelihood of an organization’s success. TMTs may not be cohesive, but they should share a common mission and organizational strategy, and individuals should practice and anticipate potential perspective-taking issues that arise in TMT decision-making. I was inspired to write this exercise as a group role-play after experiencing Bruni-Bossio & Willness (see 2016 publication) OBTC 2015 Board of Directors “no win” group decision-making exercise. Group role-play is a powerful and effective experiential learning tool. In my session, I will assign roles and have teams of four to six engage in a group decision-making task, and practice information sharing and perspective taking as a TMT. They will then engage in crisis communication as a group; the TMT will rotate through four stations focused on different audiences.

This exercise asks that participants take on one of five different roles: Owner/President of Newsberry Communications (NCQ) TV, Operations Director, Executive Director, Human Resources Director, or an NCQ Attorney. Each role is given some similar and some unique information regarding an email that was leaked to a local newspaper and posted online. The email implicates a producer in a potential quid pro quo sexual harassment situation. The email was addressed to the Executive Director (one of the roles), and that Executive Director consequently approved a new undesirable contract (a demotion) for a high performing female anchor who was just married. Not everyone on the TMT has seen this email or heard about the full situation. Different roles have information regarding the performance of the female anchor, the station ratings, the lack of a security breach, the potential costs of lawsuits, and information suggesting that NCQ is a hostile work environment for women. The session begins with individuals reading their role cards and then having a TMT meeting before communicating their shared message to internal and external audiences. In the full exercise, the TMT visits four different stations after meeting as a group. The first station has them craft an internal memorandum and a press release. The second station has them respond to the station’s twitter feed. The third station is used to prepare them for an on-camera interview and press conference. The final station has them engage with a reporter at a press conference. At the conclusion of the rotations, all groups attend a debrief session to discuss facilitators’ notes. Students reflect on techniques they will try to improve in their employment contexts.

For OBTC, I will engage session participants in two of the stations: the initial TMT meeting and the press conference. The entire TMT crisis exercise takes approximately two hours. The other stations and their adaptations will be briefly described for discussion. Instructors may want to use one or more of these stations depending on their

course objectives or focus. For example, although I originally designed the exercise to work on crisis communication skills for an executive leadership development program, I will be using the TMT meeting alone for my MBA team dynamics class (with the focus on information sharing and group decision making) and my undergraduate employment law class (with the focus on crisis communication response to harassment allegations to minimize legal consequences, turnover, and employee withdrawal).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES OF CLASS EXERCISE:

1. TMT members will practice how to recognize and share important information during a crisis, and they will use that process to decide on an organizational position.
2. Students will recognize and demonstrate their understanding of stakeholder concerns and legal implications related to sexual harassment.
3. Students will practice writing a press release and memorandum as a group and under time pressure.
4. Students will practice writing and responding to social media posts.
5. Students will practice effective press conference behaviors to control public image and minimize negative reactions.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES OF OBTC SESSION:

1. Instructors will participate as students to gain empathy for the experience and identify potential challenges in applications.
2. Instructors will be able to practice and reflect on their own communication skills using different communication media.
3. Participants will have the opportunity to discuss and identify adaptations for different classes.

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.

The following session outline uses a 60-minute schedule. Although a 90-minute session would allow for more discussion, 60-minutes would allow participants to experience a session as a participant and observe another. For class use, I use pre-work (assign some short readings in advance), but since participants at OBTC tend to choose sessions the day of, I will incorporate a short time for reading the company and main character bios and individual roll-cards.

1. 10 minutes: Introduce the exercise and purpose of the exercise. Participants will be handed a role card and seat assignment before they come into the room. The introduction will serve to guide the activity. Tables (or movable desks) will be needed so that groups of four to six can face each other.

2. 5-10 minutes: Reading time. Copies of the short company and the two main character bios will be on the tables, and participants will be given an additional one-page role card. Only two of the roles will have copies of the leaked email. Participants will be given 10 minutes to read for the OBTC session after my introduction. It is possible that some individuals will read the materials in five minutes, but I will encourage taking the full 10 minutes. Main character names reference a popular film *Anchorman* (Apatow & McKay, 2004). Those familiar with the characters are likely to laugh and make deeper assumptions about the harassing environment; however, familiarity with the film is not required.
3. 15-20 minutes: TMT discussion. A shared position needs to be decided before moving on to the next station. Groups will navigate how to process unique and shared information in a short amount of time before responding to employees and the community.
4. 10 minutes: The press conference. Depending on attendance I will either choose one at random or ask for a volunteer group. If only a small group is in attendance, that group will participate. I will record the group for their personal use, and the rest of the class can observe for comment. The press conference consists of one reporter asking a series of questions. It is not ideal to go straight to a press conference after learning of a situation like this, but in a crisis, some TMTs or leaders may find themselves responding immediately. In the full class exercise, I have the press conference as the final station following message crafting for internal and external audiences, responding to social media, and interview preparation. However, with larger class sizes
5. 10 minutes: A description of the other three stations. If a projector is available in the room, I can show video clips for use in the interview prep station. I can also show pictures of how a large class can rotate through the four communication stations after the initial TMT meeting.
 - a. **Station A: Message crafting:** Groups decide on the message that will be sent to employees regarding the email leak and the information the NCQ TMT will provide in a press release. These statements should be made quickly after an event like this one to report on the state of the leadership team. It is important to use positive language regarding what is being done rather than what is not being done (see crisis communication advice from Parsi, 2016), and messages need to be immediate and frequent so as to head-off rumors and minimize employee and community backlash and both literal and virtual water coolers.
 - b. **Station B: Social media:** Groups practice responding to community members' tweets. A fake Twitter account and feed is created, and facilitators are used to guide responses. Trolling tweets are included for analysis and discussion of how every response, even a non-response, is important.

- c. **Station C: Interview prep:** Students are given tips on how to engage with reporters and recorded interviews. They watch examples of previous groups on film to point out dos and don'ts (the facilitator chooses emphasis). TMTs engage with an on-camera expert and decide their on-camera strategy.
 - d. **Station D: On-camera press conference:** Participants position themselves for an on-camera interview. All TMT members are in attendance for this press conference. The reporter has several questions and a new piece of information that is likely to be shocking to the group. This part of the activity is recorded for future debrief on non-verbals and verbal communication during the interview.
 - e. **All class debrief:** Students first silently reflect before speaking about their experiences. Expert facilitators offer their immediate observations, and students consider and share how they will use this experience to either inspire personal change or future organizational policies and process.
6. 5 minutes: A description of the all class debrief and a discussion of suggested adaptations and applications. I will show suggested questions I have used, but I expect to answer questions for the conclusion of the session. Honestly, the debrief questions will and should change when using these stations or scenario and exercise for different courses.

4) Application to Conference theme:

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

This session fits well within the theme of *Navigating the Changing Currents*. First, the exercise is set in the context of a television station that experienced ratings decline during the past US Presidential election year. A decision to transfer a female anchor to a different time slot for improved ratings stimulates internal and external outrage as accusations of sexual harassment spread. Employee perceptions of the culture can and will change based off of the communication message of leadership, and if this type of crisis is not handled with care and empathy, emotional/attitudinal contagion (both internally and externally) could ruin the television station's viability. Second, the TMT is required to adapt their communication message and content for different media. Within the full two-hour communication exercise, members learn how message crafting for an all employee memo or email will be very different than a 140-character tweet. They learn how to respond to face-to-face questioning and virtual Internet trolls, and they choose how to confront inappropriate and illegal management choices of a colleague/peer.

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?

I have not presented work relating to this activity outside of the executive development program I originally wrote it for. Another full description of the original exercise is currently under review at *Management Teaching Review*, but that submission is unique to

this one. What I hope to accomplish in this conference session, outside of a print outlet, is an opportunity for participants to experience the activity as if they were students. Experience helps instructors identify challenges they personally may face in different courses and contexts. We can also discuss alternative applications and opportunities for adaptations in detail.

Thank you for taking the time for reviewing this session submission. I have not included the role-cards, but I have included a brief description of the full scenario I have given to expert facilitators I have invited to lead specific stations for the leadership development program (see Bullet 7 below).

6) References

- Apatow, J. (Producer), & McKay, A. (Director). (2004). *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* [Motion picture]. USA: DreamWorks Pictures.
- Bruni-Bossio, V. & Willness, C. (2016). The “Kobayashi Maru” meeting: High-fidelity experiential learning. *Journal of Management Education*, 40(5), 619-647.
- “Communication in times of crisis should offer clarity, consistency, and transparency” (November 1, 2016). *China Business Newsweekly*, 117.
- Dunn, D. & Cody, M.J. (Dec 2000). “Account credibility and public image: Excuses, justifications, denials, and sexual harassment.” *Communication Monographs*, 67(4), 372-391.
- Hoffman, J. & Moyer, J. (May 2007). “Are you ready for the TV cameras? Communicating with the media and the public following negative incidents.” *American Water Works Association*, 99(5), 48-49.
- Parsi, N. (November, 2016). “Rapid Response.” *HRMagazine*, 61(9), 44-48.

7) Full Scenario: For Station Facilitators Only

History of Newsberry Communications and NCQ-TV:

Newsberry communications is one of the largest media conglomerates in the Pacific Northwest with ownership of seven television stations, five radio broadcasting companies, two newspapers and a digital marketing and web development company. Founded in Spokane in 1919 by visionary Pacific Northwest leader Byron Newsberry, Newsberry communications continues to carry out his vision of valuable information across the airwaves. Always. The Newsberry family continues to privately own Newsberry communications to this day, being based out of Spokane, Washington. The organization employs over 2,000 people with nearly a half living and working in the greater Spokane area. Newsberry communications has historically been one of the largest employers and economic drivers in the region.

NCQ-TV, virtual channel 36, is the NBC affiliate for Spokane, Washington. It broadcasts its digital signal on UHF channel 1. The station is the flagship and namesake of The NCQ Television Group, a subsidiary of Newsberry Communications. NCQs studios are located on West Sprague Avenue in Downtown Spokane, and its transmitter is on Browne's Mountain Southeast of Spokane.

NCQ was granted authorization by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to build television stations on July 21, 1952, and was first in Spokane to sign on the air, going live on Saturday, December 2, 1952 at 6 pm with the film *Citizen Kaine*. The first NBC program NCQ broadcast was an episode of *Your Hit Parade*, which aired that evening at 7:30. In addition to being the oldest television station east of the Cascades, NCQ is also the second-oldest station in Washington state.

After being in its original studio for over forty years, NCQ moved its headquarters to in downtown Spokane in 2000, where it still is today. The reason for the move was to create an all-digital facility, so modern media technology could work well with the news station. In the process, NCQ became the first all-digital facility in Spokane.

Ron Burgundy-Bio:

Ron Burgundy joined the NCQ News team as an executive news producer and in August 2003. Ron grew up in The Dalles, Oregon and has worked in Montana, Colorado, Oregon and now Washington. Prior to joining NCQ News, Ron worked for NCQ's sister station in Portland – XYZQ. While in Portland, Ron was recognized by his colleagues with the John Smith Award for excellence in news producing, working on a story involving political corruption during a mayoral election. He also worked on a variety of local and national stories including the manhunt for two suspects involved in a five-state robbery spree. Prior to arriving at NCQ, Ron worked as a weekend producer for crosstown competitor, KZYY. While at KZYY, Ron's productions focused extensively on the military and local military matters. Ron attended Oregon East University where he played football for the Blackberries and graduated with Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications. When he's not working on stories, Ron enjoys the outdoors, spending time with his dog, and taking quick rides on his motorcycle.

Veronica Corningstone-Bio:

Veronica grew up in Western Washington, with frequent trips to visit family and friends in Eastern Washington. While at NCQ, Veronica has earned a regional Hashtag Award for "Feature News Reporting" on a story involving a dog-fighting ring in Spokane. Before coming to NCQ, Veronica filed many breaking stories from Tacoma where she was a reporter and anchor for NCQ's sister station, Queen 5. Prior to that, Veronica worked at KQTV in Redland, CA. Major stories she covered there included the California drought and the Academy Awards.

Corningstone received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Theatre Arts from the University of Portland, with an emphasis in dramatic monologues. In addition to news coverage, Veronica spends much of her time participating in local charitable events, starring in roles in the local civic theatre and emceeding fundraisers for critical causes. In her spare time, Veronica loves to celebrate Halloween, explore the outdoors as well as grow herbs and vegetables.

The Crisis:

The situation consists of a claim of sexual harassment at NCQ. NCQ's Prime Time male producer, Ron Burgundy, had a history of propositioning an anchor, Veronica

Corningstone, who kept saying, “no,” very politely and politically over the last three years. She never acted offended, but inside she thought the behavior was inappropriate, and the propositions were also accompanied by a work culture that was very male oriented (examples to follow, and by itself, the environment and these comments could be a case of hostile environment if the women felt like they were intimidated, prevented from succeeding, or they did not feel comfortable engaging at work). After Veronica got married (this past October 31: Halloween themed wedding with a flowing black dress and spider veil), her contract was up for renewal, and she was offered a new contract stating she no longer worked the Prime Time night hour anchor slot and was asked to move to the weekends where Ron did not have to see her (of course he said to her that her performance was declining and new talent is needed to gain audience). In terms of employment law, this would be considered an adverse employment decision because her pay would most likely decline, the schedule would allow less face-time, which may harm future employment decisions for Veronica, and the schedule may be more inconvenient for a high performing employee (she was not told that she was an issue with ratings until after the wedding). Ron sent an email to the Executive News Director asking for Veronica to have a new contract and new slot because no one will think she will “put-out” since she is now married.

The emails at NCQ were leaked, and the *Outlander* (local entertainment and news outlet) got a copy of the one from Ron to the Exec Director. Last night, a reporter from the *Outlander* immediately posted a blog on the *Outlander's* website and on Facebook. As a result, there have been a surge of comments on NCQ's Facebook page and twitter account. The *Spokane Chronicle* (local print newspaper) will be running a story on it today, and most of the employees at NCQ were clueless of this particular email before the leak. The female anchor, Veronica, has not filed a lawsuit, yet, and she has not yet started working the new weekend shift. She has not yet signed her contract; she has 30 more days to until the offer expires. The female anchor has been working on her resume, and she really was thinking that she would try to find another anchor position in Portland or Seattle, but currently there are no openings.

Other environmental concerns:

- Most female reporters are encouraged to wear sleeveless, low cut, and form fitting dresses whereas men are always in a suit and tie
- The female reporters tend to be the ones reporting on "fluff pieces" like dogs, bakeries, social events, etc., whereas the men report on business news, world events, and politics
- There have only been two female anchors in the primetime slots over the last 15 years
- The replacement for the female anchor has been announced and will be a much younger, more attractive and single female
- Jokes around the office often end with "that's what she said"

About the leak:

- We do not know how many emails have been leaked or who was the leaker (we do not know what is missing). It does not seem like it was a hack, per se. Instead, it seems like someone forwarded a selected email.
- The *Outlander* is protecting the source, but says the source is an employee.

TMT roles:

Role each have unique and some similar information (role cards, company and character bios are given out at the beginning of the OBTC session). Role information focus on performance indicators, history, rumors, security, turnover, attitudes, and liability concerns:

1. Owner/President: Byron Newsberry
2. Operations Director: Pat Smith (oversees all things finance, accounting, operations, IT, etc.)
3. Executive News Director: Chris Johnson (Ron’s direct boss)
4. Newsberry Attorneys: Ashley Jones and Jamie Lewis
5. HR Director: Jean Fines (oversees all things employee relations)

Organizational chart:

This chart will be shown to OBTC session participants.

