

Discussion

This study provides a refined understanding of how increased levels of disclosure in crisis situations contribute to more positive attitudes toward the military, increases perceptions expertness, character, and sociability of military spokespersons and provides greater perception of trust of the military. Confidence in the military is currently at the highest level in three decades (Everett, 2003), and Gallup polls indicate the military currently enjoys an 82 percent confidence level with the public (Everett, 2003). The lowest public confidence level since 1975 was 1981 when the public was split 50-50 on the issue of military confidence. With such high public confidence it's understandable that military officials may want to retain some degree of high public confidence.

Because a crisis situation can have an affect on an organization's image thus affecting public confidence (Coombs, 1998), this study sought to test how increased levels of disclosure, from no disclosure to full disclosure with an apology, in the wake of a crisis situation would affect the public's attitude toward the military. Results through ANOVA analysis found general attitude toward the military increased positively as the level of disclosure increased. Because there was no significant difference in the responses for the two treatments, an Air Force and Navy spokesperson, both services

can be grouped together to represent the Department of Defense as a whole and can be generalized to all spokespersons in all branches of the military. This evidence also confirms that traditional public affairs practice of minimal disclosure, despite Department of Defense guidance dictating the opposite, hinders the ability of the military to positively change the attitude of the public in the wake of a negative incident. In the case of crisis events, positive public opinion may prevent an organization from suffering severe negative outcomes (Sturges, 1994). Prior relationships may result in fairer reporting of crisis events and in more objective interpretations of one's decisions and actions in a crisis situation (Benson, 1988).

Findings

Five treatments were designed for respondents to test whether increased disclosure by a spokesperson would result in increases in public perception of overall attitude, organizational trust, and spokesperson credibility. Credibility is measured as expertness, character, and sociability. The treatments ranged from no disclosure to full disclosure with an apology. The experimental conditions significantly affected all five dependent variables resulting in a positive *beta* coefficient of .18 or greater for each dependent variable which validates the experimental design of these treatments. In every

treatment that provided an increased amount of disclosure versus no disclosure, there was an increase in perception of expertness, character, and sociability. Women also gave increasingly higher ratings for increased disclosures than men.

Increased disclosure has a positive impact on respondent attitudes, increasing as levels of disclosure increased. Even partial disclosure has a positive affect on attitude, versus non disclosure, suggesting saying anything is better than saying nothing.

Increased disclosure has a positive effect on the perceived expertness of the spokesperson and that perceived expertness also increases as the disclosure becomes more detailed. Women also place more weight on expertness as disclosure increases compared to men.

Increased disclosure has a positive effect on the character of a spokesperson. Openness did have an effect on the perceived character of the spokesperson. There is a strong correlation between women and how they identify with the character of an organization. Women in general placed more trust in the character of the military spokesperson than men did. Openness did have a significant effect on the perceived character of the military and character confidence was increased as the military disclosed more information.

Increased disclosure has a positive effect on the sociability of a spokesperson. Results also identified gender does have an effect on the perceived sociability of a military spokesperson. Sociability was rated higher by women than men.

Results of the study indicate that women are more trusting of the military than men. Likewise, the results show that the scenario and the military's reaction to that scenario in the respect of increasing disclosures also make a difference in trust. The more that was disclosed the more trust was built. Interestingly, education across respondents had no impact on the trust either women or men place in a military organization.

These results confirm our hypothesis that increasing levels of disclosure by the military in crisis situations contribute to a more positive attitude toward the military, perception of greater levels of expertness, character and sociability of a military spokesperson and greater perception of trust of the military.

The ANOVA results also identified some instances where full disclosure with an apology positively affects some variables versus full disclosure without an apology. Survey results identified that organizational trust; character and sociability are positively affected by an apology where as just disclosing some information has an effect on attitude and expertness. A firm that is at fault should admit this immediately (Benoit,

1997). While such a tactic conflicts with the desire to avoid lawsuits an organization must decide whether it is more important to restore its image by using an apology or not use an apology to avoid litigation (Benoit, 1997). The ANOVA results revealed superiority of full disclosure plus apology versus just full disclosure on the dependent variables of character and organizational trust. In general, full disclosure with an apology has a significant and predictable impact on character and organizational trust versus full disclosure without an apology which answers RQ1.

Limitations

The control condition was discarded because it did not act as a backdrop for non disclosure. A generic press release about the military adopting new uniforms, as the control condition used, failed to provide any significant test of disclosure. Overall, the sample size had limitations in its ability to fully test the affects of disclosure on transparency. A larger sample size would compensate for this limitation, providing greater statistical significance concerning the ramifications of disclosure during a crisis situation. Likewise, sample size prevented a more thorough comparison of the differences in partial or full disclosure. Again, utilizing a larger sample size would compensate for this limitation.

A further limitation of the study was the lack of strict respondent randomization. While respondents within sample groups were themselves random, the samples were each chosen for convenience. Greater generalizability of results in future studies will be achieved through stricter adherence to sample randomization methods.

Conclusion

The U.S. military, as a body of government, is often perceived to possess and display disregard for the short or long term effects of crisis, compared to a corporation's survivability and profitability, but such apathy is often not the case. The military must maintain a credible image as public support drives organizational funding. If public attitude is one of dislike, based on a lack of trust, and negative opinions of organizational expertness and character, the Department of Defense suffers greater scrutiny. The military, because of its public nature must be keenly aware of such factors as public attitude, organizational trust, technical proficiency, character, and sociability. Crises will have an effect on all of these factors. Though research is constantly proving and disproving a factor approach to organizational credibility, it remains an important phenomenon for continued study given its cognitive and affective impact on persuasive communications. In particular military (organizational) credibility, as an element

of reputation, must therefore continue to be evaluated to ensure positive credibility among Americans, particularly in an increasingly controversial arena of military non combat, and combat operations, specifically post initiations of both *Operation Enduring Freedom* (OEF) and *Operation Iraqi Freedom* (OIF).