

## IMAGE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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*The article deals with the crucial aspects of creating an efficient system of image crisis management. The idea is to emphasize the importance of making efforts to manage the image actively and to present the undisputed benefits that this process brings. The author of the article concentrates on the situation when a company is forced to cope with its negative image, when so-called 'image crisis' has occurred. Hence, the paper explains thoroughly the very idea of a crisis situation and crisis management. Then the author analyzes the most common misconceptions regarding the perception of a crisis situation, which lead to very serious consequences of neglecting potential problems. Moreover, the article scrutinizes crucial sources of an image crisis, both external and internal to an organization. Finally, the author defines and analyzes the different levels of organizational preparation for an image crisis situation.*

**Keywords:** image, crisis, crisis management

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the environment in which companies operate possesses some features which may be perceived as generally not favorable for them. First of all, it is extremely complex and it changes dynamically. Hence, the environment tends to be unpredictable to a considerable degree. This fact often leads to creating negative situations, which might constitute a major threat to the company's image. Thus, every day managers face situations in which they must take into account a very real possibility of some unexpected, negative scenario taking place. Therefore, to avoid or minimize this risk, it is extremely important to take up actions in order to prepare for a potential image crisis.

### 1. PROBLEM MANAGEMENT VS. CRISIS MANAGEMENT

As for the very definition of a *crisis situation*, it ought to be understood as a sudden, unexpected, not wanted occurrence which disturbs the balance between different fields of the company's systems and which, because of this disturbance, constitutes a threat to any aspect of the firm's operations<sup>1</sup>. However, in this article the author concentrates on

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<sup>1</sup> T. Smektała, *Public relations w sytuacjach kryzysowych przedsiębiorstw*, Wydawnictwo Astrum, Wrocław 2000, p. 63-65, Compare: W.R. Crandall, J.A. Parnell, J.E. Spillan, *Crisis management. Leading in the New Strategy Landscape*, SAGE Publications Inc, London 2013.

a crisis understood as an *image* crisis. Image is all about what people think of a company, it is a set of impressions which do not necessarily have to reflect reality, in other words - objective assessment. It is created as a reaction to an array of incentives transmitted to a company's customers, both visual and non-visual<sup>2</sup>. The fact that image itself is subjective is an extremely important feature, because it means that image can be influenced and changed, so the public opinion of a company might be created freely. However, every now and then a company faces situations which lead to sudden and substantial deterioration of the way it is perceived by the public. It is a moment when an *image* crisis occurs and that is the very aspect which is going to be analyzed in the paper.

It is essential to realize that an image crisis occurs only the moment the information about it reaches the public opinion and they start to feel indignant at the news and, as a result, at the company. For the company it seems crucial to be aware of the fact that most crisis situations evolve and develop long before they eventually become a crisis. Hence, it can be concluded that the majority of potential crises show symptoms, which can and should be detected.

Thus, most often companies face so-called *problem situations*. It may be defined as an unsolved situation which demands making a decision<sup>3</sup>. Looking at it from a bit different point of view, a problem situation might be understood as an initial trouble spot between an organization and one or some groups of clients. In other words, the appearing problem is some occurrence, internal or external for the organization, which, if it lasts, may have a considerable impact on future operations.

The way a problem situation is dealt with determines whether it gets out of control and evolves into a crisis or whether the implemented solution allows one to avoid such a negative scenario. The majority of crises can be avoided or at least minimized, therefore it is absolutely vital to take up measures at a *problem* level in order to prevent or prepare for a crisis. As a result, numerous companies have implemented so-called *problem management*, which is an integral part of strategic planning and perceived as one of the basic factors helping an organization to survive on the market. It constitutes measures in the fields of identifying, analyzing and managing all problems taking place within an organization. What is important, it also requires looking into the future in order to identify or predict trends and occurrences which may influence the possibility of the company's effective functioning in the future, and which currently may seem to have not much meaning and be not urgent. It ought to be emphasized that one of the crucial objectives of such management is solving occurring problems before the information about them reaches public opinion, in other words before a problem situation turns into a crisis.

Taking all the abovementioned aspects into consideration, it should also be emphasized that the measures taken up within *problem management* have a different characteristic to *crisis management*. Comparing with *crisis management*, dealing with a problem is less action-oriented and, by nature, more focused on prevention aspects. The pro-active aspects in *problem management* can be found only in the process of

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<sup>2</sup> Z. Knecht, *Public relations w administracji publicznej*, Wydawnictwo C. H. Beck, Warszawa 2006, p. 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> J. Larkin, M. Regester, *Risk Issues and Crisis Management: A Casebook of Best Practice*, Kogan Page Ltd., London 2005, p. 47.

identifying the potential of changes and making decisions in order to implement them before negative consequences appear. *Crisis management* itself is definitely far more reactive. It requires fast, effective and concise actions to decrease indignation of public opinion<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING THE NATURE OF CRISIS

Unfortunately, a big number of organizations do not pay attention to appropriate preparation for a potential image crisis. This fact is strictly connected with some false beliefs and stereotypes regarding the nature of a crisis situation, which still exist among numerous managers. As a result, they make wrong decisions and solve problems basing on false assumptions.

One of the most common wrong beliefs is that very serious crises happen very rarely<sup>5</sup>. Objectively, there are no basis which could prove it right. Unfortunately, the fact is that every organization can expect a crisis any moment, and it can always turn into a serious situation. At this moment it is worth stressing that there is a considerable number of potential sources of crises, both direct and indirect, which additionally emphasizes the assumption that every company should be prepared for and expect a crisis any time. Another misconception bases on the idea that crises will be solved naturally without the company's involvement. Such an assumption seems extremely naïve. Professional managers cannot run a company counting mostly on pure luck. They must take up active measures to plan and control as many aspects of the company's operations and processes as possible. The abovementioned wrong belief is also connected with another false assumption which says that in case of very serious crises which have afflicted also other companies, or even whole sectors of the economy, the crisis will be solved by somebody else, e.g. a state or other public institution. In such a case it is important to remember that generally private companies are left on their own. It is difficult to imagine or expect that other institutions will worry about the future of some particular organization. Basically, only the company is interested in surviving on the market and they should and must take up active measures to solve their problems.

Another very perilous assumption is that a crisis can be solved fast and efficiently even when an organization reacts only the moment a crisis appears, meaning when the information about it reaches the public. It seems to be one of the crucial mistakes made by managers regarding the approach to image management. Basically, they do not notice or pay attention to the need for appropriate preparation for possible future problems with an image. They believe that if some image crisis occurs, the company will be able to mobilize and overcome the negative picture. This misconception is very often linked with, and at the same time supported by, another wrong assumption which says that all the actions connected with preparation for a sudden deterioration of image are just an unnecessary cost. Hence, an organization does not take up any measures to conceive and prepare any procedures in case of image problems.

The two abovementioned beliefs can be supplemented by another misconception which says that in a company's surroundings, both internal and external, the changes

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> T. Smektała, *Public relations...*, op. cit., p. 65, Compare: D. Elliott, B. Herbane, E. Swartz, *Business Continuity Management. A crisis management approach*, Taylor & Francis Ltd., London 2001.

which might constitute a potential threat to the organization's future image generally do not take place and, hence, there is no need or objective reason to make a try to detect and control them<sup>6</sup>.

A lot of managers believe that serious problems with how the company is perceived cannot happen to big, well-managed organizations. It is another example of naive reasoning, since both the size and satisfactory financial situation of the company have very little to do with the possibility of it being afflicted with a negative image. Those features do not protect company from such problems. It seems very clear and obvious especially when we take into consideration the fact that there are numerous potential sources of image crisis, and the majority of them are completely not connected with the question of a company's size or how big a profit it is able to generate.

It is also extremely irresponsible to assume that in the case of some situation which in a negative way influences how an organization is perceived, public opinion will stand on the company's side and people generally will not change their views regarding the institution in question. Unfortunately, human mentality does not work in this way and in case of some problems, people have a natural, innate tendency to suspect and assume that there is some truth in the information which they receive. As a result, they naturally start to doubt whether an organization is still worth being trusted. What is extremely important, such a phenomenon occurs even when there is no firm evidence that would support their opinion. In connection with this fact, the rule of so-called silent majority ought to be mentioned. The basic idea lying beneath this rule is that generally most people do not have a strong, thought-out opinion about most events and situations which happen around them. They simply do not make any effort to scrutinize the situations profoundly in order to find out the pure facts about them, which would allow the people to build their own objective opinion. However, if asked about any views regarding some events, most people will express the opinion, and it will be the one which, as they believe, is expressed by the majority of the public. In other words, they will unconsciously join the views of the biggest group of people. It is a result of a natural tendency to not stand out from the crowd. In this way people who even do not have a direct contact with an organization start expressing and spreading an opinion about it. In case of some negative information about a company, which has reached the public, most people will join the group which criticizes an organization. In this way they contribute to making the crisis even more significant and widespread. Thus, managers should always assume that in case of some crisis, the majority of the public will be against their company.

Another misconception regarding what the true nature of an image crisis is concerns the question of who within an organization should be involved in managing crisis situations. Managers often wrongly assume that they are the only ones who ought to be interested in preparing for and – in case of a crisis – dealing with troubles with a negative perception of a company<sup>7</sup>. As a result, the whole staff becomes excluded from all these actions. It is vital to be conscious of the fact that the effective handling of an image crisis requires creating a concise, thought-out system which covers all the fields of

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<sup>6</sup> T. Smektała, *Public relations...*, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

the company's operations. Building it is possible only with the involvement of the whole personnel.

A typical and at the same time very hazardous false belief expressed by managers is that some types of crises do not concern an organization which they run. Of course, the probability of the different kinds of crises to occur varies considerably; however, in the process of creating procedures which are supposed to be implemented in case of an image crisis, it is important not to forget that each sort of negative occurrences must be taken into account, analyzed and has to lead to implementing appropriate procedures. At this point it seems worth mentioning another misconception which very often accompanies the previous one. There is a common belief that the type of crisis which has already taken place in the organization, and which has been dealt with and solved, will not happen again. Of course, the experience gained during managing some particular kind of a crisis is invaluable, as it helps to create or improve procedures for the future. However, such measures will never make a company feel completely safe: they can only help to decrease the probability of occurrence of another very similar problem.

The last perilous, false assumption regarding the perception of an image crisis concerns the issue of cooperating with the media. Some organizations wrongly believe that they are able to influence the media. At this point it is important to define what kind of an impact is being scrutinized. On the one hand, it must be firmly emphasized that a company has an influence on the media, but only in terms of planning information policies and putting into practice communication systems between the two institutions. Companies cooperate with media, thus informing them about all the important aspects of their operations, and as a result, it can be stated that they have an impact on what information reaches the media. However, it is crucial to understand that companies do not have an influence on the media in terms of the ability to force them to publicize and comment some information in the way which some company would wish. In other words, the media are independent of private companies and they generally put forward the news the way they believe is objective. This objectivity aspect causes organizations to be described and commented often in not favorable light. Unfortunately, it is especially true in case of crises: the media are especially interested in all kinds of scandals, illegal activities, failures, etc. Therefore, this point of view shows that managers cannot expect the media to present only positive news about the organizations they are in charge of. Analyzing the aspect of media relations, it seems important to mention another typical misconception which says that in case of a crisis the best way is to stop passing on any information to the media by shutting down outside communication channels. Such a policy is often implemented by the institutions which have not created any procedures regarding image management and, as a result, do not have any idea how and what sort of information to pass on. Lack of open communication with the public, in other words not commenting the unfavorable situation, always leads to negative perception of a company. Naturally, often even unconsciously, the public starts to distrust an organization, suspecting that it has something to hide. From the point of view of public relations, such a situation is extremely dangerous, since it quickly leads to a substantial deterioration of the company's image.

### 3. SOURCES OF CRISES

As it has already been stated, in today's world organizations operate in the environment which is characterized by permanent, often unpredictable and rapid changes. Unfortunately, most of the external factors which have an influence on a company are impossible to control. Moreover, they are very typical and natural potential sources of crises.

One of the most obvious and at the same time most hazardous external factors is a macro-economic one. It is important to stress that this aspect can be analyzed at both global and national level<sup>8</sup>. An organization's possibility of development is connected and conditioned with the current phase of economic cycles. Companies might face the times of either boom or slump on markets. They have a direct impact on the possibilities of getting a loan from financial institutions, gaining new customers or partners for co-operation. Thus, an unfavorable global economic situation may lead to disastrous consequences, such as deterioration of a company's financial situation, losing the share of the market, and even, in the worst scenario, to bankruptcy.

Another potential external problem may stem from legislative issues. All regulations in this field create some law system in which organizations are obliged to operate. For them one of the crucial aspects seems to be a tax system, which has a direct impact on the financial situation of a company and its possibility to do business in the long term and develop itself. Regarding this factor, it should be emphasized that crisis situations in this field occur mainly in the case of the implementation of *new* regulations. That is the matter which seems to be most perilous for entrepreneurs. Permanent and very often unexpected changes of legislation may easily disturb the stability of a company's operations. It is vital to stress that it is not necessarily the question of strict regulations that worry managers, but the problem of constant changes which deprive organizations of the possibility to make strategic plans or control expenditure in the long term. At this moment it is important to state that a legislative factor is strictly connected with a political one. Very often political decisions have a substantial influence on companies' competitive abilities and, as a consequence, their position on the market. As a result of state policies, some sectors of the economy are supported and favored, others are restructured or limited. A typical example could be the question of licenses to operate in some sectors of industry, which leads to limitation and control of some fields of free market. Again, it must be clearly said that, just like in case of the legislative factor, the crucial problem regarding the political influence on the functioning of institutions is often the unexpected changes of decisions.

Often a crisis can be conjured up by some accusations or rumors regarding various company's actions, projects, procedures, decisions, etc. They might be some anonymous and false information or a comment in the media. Such a source of a crisis can be extremely dangerous, because it causes direct damage to a company's image and reputation. Quite a similar problem is a deliberate action against the company, such as sabotage, stealing information or industrial espionage.

A very typical and dangerous source of a crisis is a so-called „human factor”. It consists of various situations which are connected with workers' behavior and their

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<sup>8</sup> T. Smektała, *Public relations...*, op. cit., p. 73-74; Compare: S. Fink, *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*, Backinprint.com, London 2000.

weaknesses<sup>9</sup>. They might stem from alcohol or drug problems, discrimination, sexual harassment, unethical behavior, racism, etc. This factor can be extended into the problems with some actions taken up by some groups of workers, for instance going on strike. These are conscious measures taken as a reaction to company's business decisions.

The next factor which may initiate image problems is problems with company's products. They might be caused by bad policies regarding launching a product into the market or a necessity to resign from some products or services. A very typical problem in this field is triggered off by detecting some serious defects of a product. Such information weakens a positive image very fast and it is extremely difficult to change customers' views in this respect. As a result, a big number of them may choose the product which is delivered by competition. In this way an image problem turns directly into a financial and economical threat.

Finally, image problems can stem from an ecological factor, natural disasters or as a consequence of production line breakdown. Crises which originate from the ecological aspect are conjured up by the different kinds of air pollution, contamination of water or ground, or by the incorrect use of raw materials. Concerning natural disasters, seriousness of this source of a crisis is connected with the fact that they are completely independent of an organization. However, it does not mean that companies should not prepare for such situations.

#### **4. LEVELS OF ORGANIZATIONAL PREPARATION FOR A CRISIS SITUATION**

All the above-mentioned potential factors of an image crisis prove that every organization's environment, in which they operate, appears as immensely complex and permanently changeable. Combining this phenomenon with the fact that the company's image consists of numerous elements and is influenced by a large amount of various factors, it can be stated that to create and manage a firm's image effectively, organizations must prepare to this process very consciously and actively. In other words, they are compelled to develop proper procedures.

Generally, there is a distinction of five main levels of preparation for a crisis situation. All of them present a gradual change and development of different elements which finally create a complex system of crisis management (Table 1).

The development begins with the first level, which represents the most basic measures taken in the fields of crisis management<sup>10</sup>. Here, the company limits its activity only to implementation of the regulations concerning health and safety-at-work. Procedures are put into practice partially and without any overall plan. In most cases they are also obsolete.

It suggests rather a passive approach, organizations do not make efforts to detect early signals of potential image problems and do not prepare separately for the different kinds of crises. There is not any system of early warnings.

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<sup>9</sup> T. Smektała, *Public relations...*, op. cit., p. 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> I. Mitroff, Ch. Pearson, *Crisis management, a diagnostic guide for improving your organization's crisis preparedness*, Wiley John & Sons, Incorporated, New York 1993, p. 125-126.

Table 1. Levels of organizational preparation for an image crisis situation

Levels	Main features
First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- implementation of only health and safety-at-work regulations;</li> <li>- old and randomly implemented procedures;</li> <li>- workers not trained, they do not know their roles;</li> <li>- belief that an organization is not susceptible to crisis situations;</li> <li>- implementation of procedures does not require involvement of whole organization;</li> <li>- measures in the field of monitoring and preparation to different kinds of crises are very limited;</li> <li>- company does not draw conclusion and does not learn on previous crises;</li> <li>- no funding secured;</li> <li>- no crisis team;</li> <li>- negation of the need for concise crisis management system;</li> <li>- no analysis in the field of how different groups and institutions may affect an organization;</li> <li>- no predictions on how crisis may influence outside groups and institutions.</li> </ul>
Second	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- complex programs only in case of problems caused by a human or natural disasters;</li> <li>- limited funding secured;</li> <li>- basic structure supporting a crisis management system;</li> <li>- concentrating on technological factors, neglecting potential role of organizational culture;</li> <li>- no analysis in the field of how different groups and institutions may affect an organization;</li> <li>- more members of management start to acknowledge the importance of active crisis management.</li> </ul>
Third	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- detailed plans on crises caused by a human and characteristic to the sector in which a company operates;</li> <li>- procedures of informing public opinion;</li> <li>- crisis management procedures combined with quality management procedures;</li> <li>- plans and procedures not integrated vertically or horizontally – each department develops their own procedures;</li> <li>- analysis in the field of how different groups and institutions affect an organization;</li> <li>- management starts to be aware of the importance of active crisis management.</li> </ul>
Fourth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- integrated plans and procedures between departments, but still limited to a few kinds of potential crises (typical for the sector in which a company operates);</li> <li>- systematic approach to prevention and procedures of dealing with an on-going crisis;</li> </ul>



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Levels	Main features
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- management makes the revision and systematically improves plans and procedures;</li> <li>- a crisis team is created.</li> </ul>
Fifth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- complex and concise system of crisis management;</li> <li>- plans and procedures for every kind of potential crisis;</li> <li>- monitor and revise every stage of development of crisis management system;</li> <li>- complex system of early detection of potential crisis signals;</li> <li>- measures and procedures are tested;</li> <li>- implementation of mechanisms which stop spreading damage and resume normal operations;</li> <li>- awareness of the influence of human, organizational, emotional and technical factors;</li> <li>- awareness of the role of organizational culture;</li> <li>- formal analysis of <i>all</i> groups and institutions that may have an impact on a crisis situation;</li> <li>- well-developed system of communication with the public;</li> <li>- <i>whole</i> organization involved in a crisis management system;</li> <li>- well organized crisis team;</li> <li>- proper funding secured</li> </ul>

*Source: Own study, basing on I. Mitroff, Ch. Pearson, Crisis..., op. cit, p. 125-132.*

Companies do not analyze the influence of different individuals, groups, organizations and institutions on firms' activities. Moreover, they do not possess any procedures of scrutinizing past crises in order to improve future measures. In other words, they do not have the ability to learn from mistakes.

Regarding employees, their abilities in preparation and dealing with image crises are very low due to lack of proper training in this field. Workers do not know their responsibilities. Hence, all actions are rather chaotic.

What is more, the organization's beliefs that it is not susceptible to any crises, that the risk of getting into one is very low. Because of this misconception the preparations to a crisis are limited to the situations which require implementation of only ready plans of actions. Moreover, putting these procedures into practice does not demand involvement of the whole organization.

The company which represents the first level of preparation for crisis also does not possess any infrastructure which would support and make the crisis management process possible. That means that there is a lack of two major elements – there are no funds for these measures secured in the company's budget and there is no team, a panel of experts who would be chosen, set up and made permanently responsible for taking active measures in the field of crisis management.

Apart from the lack of the abovementioned infrastructure aspect, such organizations do not analyze the impact of a potential crisis, understood as serious problems with a firm's image, on different groups of people who got involved in it, both directly

and indirectly. It seems extremely important to realize that crises may affect numerous individuals and groups, both within a company and outside it<sup>11</sup>. It has an impact on workers, clients, stakeholders, local communities, suppliers, buyers, competitors, etc. Neglecting such scrutiny makes it impossible to envisage the consequences of crises, which reduces the efficiency of crisis management to a considerable degree.

The last feature of the described first-level organizations is connected with rather philosophical approach to the idea of a crisis itself, presented by the company's management. Management executives, who are responsible for creating and implementing the company's strategy, do not perceive preparation and managing crises as important, such actions are not among the company's priorities. They negate the need to set up a concise system of procedures and measures in that field. This aspect seems to be one of the crucial ones, because supervisors are the individuals who are responsible for creating the organization's vision, they convey the philosophy to the subordinates, initiating appropriate actions. When there is a lack of such guidance, there is no incentive to pay attention to the question of dealing with image crises.

As companies become more conscious of the importance of taking active measures in the field of image crisis management, they climb up another levels of preparation for it<sup>12</sup>. Organizations begin to create complex plans in case of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, tornados, fires, etc. Then they start to notice the importance of having procedures concerning crises caused by human activity, also the ones which are directly connected with the specification of the sector in which some company operates. Furthermore, companies create, at the beginning, a very basic procedure of informing public opinion in case any problems occur.

Gradually, the image crisis management procedures start to be connected with, and often stem from, activities in the field of quality management, which constitutes the base for creating a complex, concise system. What is more, companies initiate an analysis of the impact of some crises on people, organizations and institutions which operate outside the company. In other words, companies start to notice that image problems influence not only individuals working for them, but also a large group of external entities.

The last, most advanced level of preparation for an image crisis, presents a very conscious and complex approach to the management of crisis situation<sup>13</sup>. Both the top management and regular workers are very well aware of the importance of taking up active actions in this field. What is extremely important, at the same time they are conscious of their own weaknesses, which seems to be a very sought after virtue which enables the company to become very strong by concentrating on eliminating them. It builds substantial potential of effective image crisis management.

The fifth-level-organizations posses plans and procedures for each group of crisis situations – they are able to implement at least one measure from every group of prevention measures. The system of crisis management is constantly monitored, ana-

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<sup>11</sup> A. Zelek, *Zarządzanie kryzysowe w przedsiębiorstwie*, Instytut Organizacji i Zarządzania w Przemysle Orgmasz, Warszawa 2003, p. 206-208.

<sup>12</sup> I. Mitroff, Ch. Pearson, *Crisis...*, op. cit., p. 127-130.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 131-132.

lyzed and revised. What is more, the measures and procedures are tested in terms of efficiency and functionality. What seems to be especially important is that the company has developed a complex system of early detecting the warning signals about potential problems. It is obvious that the knowledge about the first signals of potential dangers allows organizations to react fast and, as a consequence, in many situations they can deal with the problem before it actually turns into a serious threat. This philosophy seems crucial in building an effective system of image management, putting prevention as a priority.

Another element of a well-prepared organization is the implementation of mechanisms which limit or eliminate the spread of damage caused by some negative happening. Such an organization invests a considerable amount of money in order to be able to put into practice the procedures which are supposed to enable the company to resume normal operations as fast as possible. It can be stated that such a company has prepared the plans and procedures which take into consideration all essential factors responsible for developing crisis situations. It means that they are aware of the role of both technical, human, organizational and emotional factors.

Apart from all the formal aspects of organizational systems, companies ranked at level five take into account the influence and role of organizational culture, understood as all informal behaviors and values which are accepted and expressed by workers. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this informal aspect of the company's life in terms of its impact on how the company operates. Neglecting this element may cause serious consequences because the culture which does not support formal objectives of a company can very easily initiate internal conflicts, which may develop into disastrous crises. That is why, a professional approach to image crisis management requires constant monitoring and active managing the characteristic of organizational culture in order to create the culture which will support the pursuit of the formal strategy of a company.

Of course such organizations also pay attention to creating and developing good relations with public opinion. They manage the communication with not only the media, but also all the other so-called 'groups of interests', including shareholders, clients, suppliers and buyers, local communities, local authorities, etc. These groups are profoundly analyzed and companies establish the rules of contacting them<sup>14</sup>.

The last and at the same time extremely important element of good preparation for a crisis situation is a crisis team<sup>15</sup>. The decision who is going to be a member of the team is made before the actual crisis occurs. Thanks to this rule, the moment some problem appears, the team gathers and begins work immediately, without any unnecessary delay, which is crucial to be able to deal with the crisis effectively. What is more, each member of the team perfectly knows what aspect of crisis management they are responsible for, as the tasks are set very clearly.

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<sup>14</sup> Compare: T. Yeshin, *Integrated Marketing Communications. The Holistic Approach*, Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford 1998; D. Peppers, M. Rogers, *Enterprise One-to-One: Tools for Building Unbreakable Customer Relationships in the Interactive Age*, Piatkus, London 1997.

<sup>15</sup> A. Zelek, *Zarządzanie kryzysowe...*, op. cit., p. 201-204.

There is a general rule that the crisis team ought to consist of both people from management and at least one member of each company's department. In this way it can be said that the whole organization becomes involved in handling the situation. Finally, the team is provided with appropriate funds, which let them operate effectively in case of a crisis.

All the abovementioned elements of the highest level of preparation for a crisis constitute a complex, concise system which protects an organization and allows it to react fast and properly to the signals of potential image problems. The awareness of such a need seems to be crucial and indispensable to ensure safe and effective functioning<sup>16</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

In today's world the environment in which organizations operate tends to change constantly and quite fast. This fact conjures up some very negative consequences for companies: there is a big possibility that they can be surprised by some unfavorable situations – economical, social, political, cultural etc. If they are not prepared for them, organizations might have to face considerable deterioration of their image. In this aspect it is crucial to realize that there are various potential sources of an image crisis, both internal and external. That is why it is extremely important to be aware of such possibilities and prepare for them in advance. Thus, companies should implement concise and complex systems of image crisis management.

However, numerous companies still harbor a big number of false beliefs concerning the real nature of a crisis, which generally leads to the situation in which they are very passive in the field of prevention, preparation and managing image problems. As companies begin to realize the importance of taking active measures in this area, they go through different phases which reflect a gradual progress, consequently and finally leading to a well thought-out, efficient system of coping with image crises.

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## ZARZĄDZANIE KRYZYSEM WIZERUNKOWYM

### Streszczenie

*Artykuł dotyczy kluczowych aspektów budowania efektywnego systemu zarządzania sytuacją kryzysową. Ideą jest zwrócenie uwagi na istotność aktywnego zarządzania wizerunkiem oraz przedstawienie niewątpliwych korzyści wynikających z podjęcia takich działań. Autor koncentruje się na sytuacji, w której firma zmuszona jest poradzić sobie z negatywnym wizerunkiem, gdy pojawił się tzw. kryzys wizerunkowy. Zatem w pracy na wstępie gruntownie wyjaśniono, jak należy rozumieć pojęcia sytuacji kryzysowej oraz zarządzania kryzysowego. Następnie autor analizuje najistotniejsze błędne przekonania odnoszące się do sposobu postrzegania sytuacji kryzysowej, które prowadzą do bardzo poważnych konsekwencji z powodu lekceważenia potencjalnych problemów. Co więcej, w artykule poddano analizie źródła kryzysu wizerunkowego, zarówno o charakterze wewnętrznym, jak i zewnętrznym. W końcu, autor zdefiniował oraz przeanalizował poziomy przygotowania organizacji do zarządzania kryzysem wizerunkowym.*

*Słowa kluczowe:* wizerunek, kryzys, zarządzanie kryzysowe

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