

THE AFTERMATH OF A DEADLY EXPLOSION: A RHETORICAL  
ANALYSIS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION AS EMPLOYED  
BY BRITISH PETROLEUM AND PHILLIPS PETROLEUM

by

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## ABSTRACT

Using a rhetorical, public address approach to conducting a case study analysis, this study argues for the connection between rhetoric, specifically public address, and public relations. This study goes beyond seeking to understand the damage a crisis has caused and, rather, views the discourse as a crucial tool for the success of a crisis response method. Within this study, a working definition of the term *crisis* is created, and the possibility for developing a crisis response model for industry-specific accidents using a hybrid of the crisis communication strategies of Coombs, Benoit, and Hearit is explored. The rhetorical effectiveness of the crisis response and image restoration strategies used by British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum in response to tragic explosions that occurred at their respective facilities is analyzed. Overall, this study is meant to be an analysis of the use of crisis response strategies in similar accidents in the industrial field and how the communication used affects the stakeholders' perception of the refineries as a whole. The results of this analysis will contribute to organizational strategy improvement and existing literature on crisis communication and rhetoric. Furthermore, aside from the airline industry, the body of crisis communication literature is lacking in the study of industry-specific crises, particularly in the refinery industry. Therefore, it should be suggested that industry-specific accidents and the crisis response strategies should be studied in hopes of developing a model that could be used for these accidents.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALPA: The Airline Pilots Association

BP: British Petroleum

F-20: Blowdown Drum and Stack

NWA: Northwest Airlines

OSHA: Occupational Safety and Health Administration

PACE: Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy union

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

An organization is a complex system with an intricate structure. This structure is not only inclusive of a hierarchy of employees, but also includes a development of personnel dedicated to assessing the potential for a crisis and, in many cases, responding to and restoring the organization's image following a crisis. A sole definition of the term *crisis* is unavailable in crisis communication literature, as a broad spectrum of possible definitions is brought forth by various authors. Fink (1986) defines a crisis as being a “[...] turning point for better or worse” (p. 15). Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) argue that organizational crises are “[...] normal events triggered by the complexity of the system itself and by faulty decisions as well by the interrelationship between technological systems and the humans who attempt to manage them” (p. 20). Barton (1993) offers an extension of the definition of crisis to include the possible negative repercussions of the crisis. Barton argues that a crisis is “[...] a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results. The event and its aftermath may significantly damage an organization and its employees, products, services, financial condition, and reputation” (p. 2). Similarly, Fearn-Banks (1996) characterize a crisis as being “[...] a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, a company or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name” (p. 1).

Based on the aforementioned definitions of *crisis*, an organizational crisis has a far-reaching impact on not only the organization itself but a wide range of stakeholders, as well. Therefore, studying organizational crises and how the organizations respond to

these crises allow a greater understanding of the ways that this specific set of groups are touched by these events. Consequently, the following case study seeks to create a working definition of the term *crisis* to be used universally in crisis communication literature, illustrate the connection between rhetoric and public relations, while exploring the possibility for developing a crisis response model for industry-specific accidents using a hybrid of the crisis communication strategies of Coombs, Benoit, and Hearit.

### Introduction to Case Studies

In the organizational system, the occurrence of a crisis of the human breakdown type leaves an organization vulnerable not only financially, but also in terms of their image and stakeholder relationships. In the following chapters, two cases of human breakdown in the refinery industry will be explored. It is the researcher's contention that the similarity and/or difference in the crisis response strategies used by each refinery will provide an argument for the possibility of developing a crisis response model for industry-specific crises, particularly in the refinery industry.

### British Petroleum

The first case is the British Petroleum Refinery<sup>1</sup> of Texas City, Texas, the third largest refinery plant in the United States. This refinery has a large impact on the nation's overall gasoline supply. As the Fatal Accident Investigation Report released by British Petroleum (2005a) notes, the refinery has the capacity to process "[...] 460,000

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the refinery is owned and operated by BP Products North America, Inc. BP Amoco Chemical Company does not own or operate the BP Texas City refinery and, therefore, cannot accept liability.

barrels per day (bpd) and an ability to produce about 11 million gallons of gasoline a day” (p.7). According to Carson (2005), this amount of total production makes up roughly 3 percent of gasoline supplies in the United States.

At approximately 1:20 p.m. CT on March 23, 2005, a deadly explosion with “enough force to rock buildings 10 miles away” acquired negative national attention for the 1,200 acre British Petroleum plant (Moran & Turner, 2005). According to the aforementioned report filed by British Petroleum, the incident occurred due to an ignition of hydrocarbon vapors released from the Blowdown Drum and Stack (F-20). Furthermore, the report argues that British Petroleum unit managers and operators in the isomerization unit overfilled and overheated the raffinate splitter 20 times higher than it should have been, causing F-20 to become unable to handle all of the fluids and vapors, causing liquid to discharge from the top of the stack. It is then that an unknown ignition source ignited the vapor cloud, resulting in the explosion.

Ultimately, the explosion was responsible for the death of 15 workers and the injury of an estimated 170 other people which included plant workers and the residents of nearby neighborhoods. According to British Petroleum (2005a), “[m]any of those injured or killed were congregated in or around temporary trailers used for supporting turnaround work taking place on the nearby Ultracracker unit” (p. 7).

## Phillips Petroleum

The second case is similar as it involves a major explosion that resulted in the death and injury of both its employees and contract employees. Phillips Petroleum<sup>2</sup>, a refinery located near Pasadena, Texas, produces over 370 million pounds per year of styrene-butadiene copolymer [...]” (White, 2000). This styrene-butadiene copolymer substance is better known as K-Resin. According to Rendon, Bryant, Hopper, and Antosh (2000):

[t]he K-Resin made at the plant is a chemical used to make an array of products including clear packaging materials such as shrink wrap, bread wrappers, bottles for drinking water, clear boxes and trays, cups, lids ,toys, shower doors, and high-quality coat hangers. (p. A1)

Furthermore, Rendon (2000a) reports that Pat Duke of DeWitt & Co., a consulting firm, states that the ability to produce over 370 million pounds per year gives Phillips the status of the “[...] nation’s major manufacturer of what is basically a toughening additive” (n.p.).

At approximately 1:22 p.m. CT on March 27, 2000, an explosion and fire responsible for one death and 71 injuries occurred at the Houston Chemical Complex for Phillips Petroleum. According to White (2000), “[t]he fire produced huge plumes of black smoke that spread over the heavily-industrialized Houston Shipping Channel and neighboring residential areas” (n.p.). As a result of this explosion, workers in neighboring plants and nearby residents were urged to remain indoors, while twenty-three area schools issued a “shelter in place,” turning off their air conditioning and closing doors and windows (Rendon, 2000a).

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<sup>2</sup> It is worthy of note that, at the time of this explosion, Phillips and Chevron had not yet combined their chemical operations into a joint venture. Therefore, Chevron cannot be held liable for any part in this explosion.

The explosion occurred at the K-Resin facility and involved a type of plastic made with butadiene. At the time of the explosion, the tank was out of service for cleaning and had no pressure or temperature gauges that would have provided the workers with an alert to the approaching crisis (Antosh, 2000). Ultimately, this explosion resulted in one fatality, while 32 Phillips employees and 39 subcontractors were taken to local hospitals for sustaining burns, smoke inhalation, and cuts from debris.

### Rationale

As common ethical assumptions would predict, the causes of the loss of life is, on its own, worthy of attention. However, the British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum cases exemplify more far-reaching consequences than one may imagine. If one can envision an organization serving as a threat to the shelter and health of the citizens living nearby, these widespread consequences become clear. Of the reports released following the explosion, many detailed the frightening experiences community members faced, as a result of the explosion. According to Staff Reports (2005), the British Petroleum refinery explosion “[...] knocked Texas City resident William Hudson off of his barstool. He was in the Texas City Tavern, within a quarter-mile of the BP plant” (n.p.). Similarly, a woman was baby-sitting at a friend’s house in the 2300 block of Second Avenue when the blast blew in the front windows of the house. The woman began feeling sick and throwing up following the exposure to the fumes in the air (Staff Reports, 2005). Others in the area reported damage to their vehicles and homes and a feeling of illness due to the fumes in the air. Therefore, the threat to two core values: shelter and health become an

additional interest to this study aside from the organizations' standpoint of a loss in profit and productivity.

As humans, we can relate to valuing life, trust, and security in addition to shelter and health. Both the British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum cases touch each one of these values. In both cases, employees were killed and many other employees were severely injured. In the Phillips Petroleum case, millworker Roby Plemons was so badly injured that his friends did not even recognize him until he spoke. According to Lavelle (2000), Plemons recalled that one of his friends asked him to let him take his (Plemons') gloves off, but they were not his gloves—they were his hands.

Furthermore, both of the refineries were faced with the possibility of losing the trust of their stakeholders, especially employees and nearby communities, as their role in the explosions' occurrence was being questioned. Due to the occurrence of numerous tragedies at each plant before the explosion occurred, the security of workers was being questioned. Additionally, the security of stockholder's finances was in peril, as each refinery's stock prices took a momentary hit following the explosion at their individual plants.

Aside from our values, however, several other factors contribute to the importance of studying crises such as those of the British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum explosions. Due to the recent occurrence of numerous tragedies at both the Texas City and Pasadena plants and the rhetorical uniqueness of the crisis communication strategies employed in each case, the following case studies will fulfill a need for adding to the lack of literature concerning industrial accidents in the body of crisis communication research. Furthermore, the following study will be a significant addition

to existing crisis communication research as each refinery followed an extremely similar crisis response pattern without using a particular model. Additionally, aside from the airline industry, the body of crisis communication literature is lacking in the study of industry-specific crises, particularly in the refinery industry. Therefore, it should be suggested that industry-specific accidents and the crisis response strategies should be studied in hopes of developing a model that could be used for these accidents.

### Occurrence of Numerous Tragedies

Much of the negative attention both refineries received following the major explosions was a result of the numerous tragedies that had occurred within the proximity of a year prior to the blasts. Due to this onslaught of tragedies, each refinery was criticized of neglecting safety concerns of employees, while being held accountable for misrepresenting their safety record. Therefore, the occurrence of numerous tragedies is worthy of discussion, as it provides a background for much of the public relations problem each refinery faced following the larger explosions.

Both British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum are familiar with onsite tragedies. The March 23<sup>rd</sup> explosion at British Petroleum was the third fatal accident at the Texas City plant that year. In May 2004, a worker died in a fall, while two were killed and one injured in September as scalding water burst from a pipe (Carson, 2005). Additionally, Elder (2005) reports that the Texas Public Interest Research Group claimed, in a 2004 analysis, that “BP’s U.S. chemical plants and refineries had more than 3,565 accidents since 1990” making the company number one in accidents in the nation (n.p.).

Similarly, the March 27<sup>th</sup> explosion at Phillips Petroleum was the second fatal accident at the Pasadena plant within a year, as well. Antosh (2002) states that, “[i]n June 1999, an explosion at the plant killed two people and injured four others there” (n.p.). According to White (2000), “[t]he Phillips complex also had explosions in April 1999, when a rail car containing polypropylene blew up, and in August, when there was an explosion in the polypropylene section of the plant” (n.p.). Additionally, Mokhiber and Weissman (2001) of CorpWatch list both British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum as two of the ten worst corporations of 2000, specifically citing that the March 27<sup>th</sup> Phillips Petroleum explosion was “[...] the third fatal accident at the sprawling petrochemical complex in the last 11 years” and “[...] the fourth within the last year at the facility” (n.p.)

Despite the evidence of lackadaisical safety practices and numerous resulting accidents, both refineries contend that they are exceptionally safe and that the prior events that have occurred within their own refineries are unrelated to the larger explosions focused on in the following case studies. However, it is possible that the credibility of such a statement is weak in the eyes of the shareholder who notices that, although the events are unrelated in a direct sense, they still serve as contributing factors to an overall perception of both the British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum plants as being unsafe and ill-supervised.

## Rhetorical Uniqueness of Study

### Rhetoric and Theory

Within the development of the study of public address, rhetorical scholars began to examine rhetorical artifacts in a broad sense, focusing on general principles and building theory, rather than examining the artifacts for their individual worth. However, in response to a 1986 essay by Hart, Darsey (1994) argued against Hart's claim that theory is richest when it examines multiple studies of similar catastrophes. Darsey advanced the claim that rhetorical study does not have to be limited to building theory, as an individual artifact can still contribute a distinct understanding of certain rhetorical events. Similarly, Toulmin (1993), argued:

This is not to deny that theory has any part to play in deepening our grasp of the humanities; it does. But this part is not universal or foundational; it is local, occasional, and limited. Some characters in history or literature behave in ways that are so bizarre and unexpected that we look with relief to a cultural anthropologist, a psychoanalyst, a sociologist, or an economist, who will give us insight into particular actions that would otherwise remain mysterious to the point of unintelligibility. But the virtue of this insight is the fact that it addressed the particular issue that concerns us in the particular situation. (p. 83)

In his article "Must we all be rhetorical theorists?" Baskerville (1977) examines the complementary relationship between history and rhetorical criticism. Baskerville claims that one does not need to be an historian to study public address, as the historical method does not belong to any one academic discipline; each discipline develops its own historians. History is considered a supplement to scholarship and, similarly, criticism may contribute to the enrichment of historical writing. According to Baskerville:

[...] given the practical nature of rhetorical discourse, its close relationship with audience and situation, it is inevitable that 'history'—the weaving of facts regarding speaker, audience, and occasion into some kind of

meaningful narrative—will constitute a part of, or a preliminary to, an essay in rhetorical criticism. (p. 116)

Although criticism and history appear to be interwoven in this regard, one may study public address without being a historian. Similarly, as Baskerville noted, not all significant scholarship about public address must be criticism and not all scholars need to be rhetorical critics.

It should be argued that rhetorical study that does not function solely to create theory is still worthy to contribute to the study of rhetoric, how rhetoric is used, and provides insight into the artifact under examination. As explained by Darsey (1994):

Why should we not expect great themes to be built as mosaics out of tiny pieces of individually colored tile? [...] The writer of the individual essay, like the maker of tiles, is obligated, within his or her defined compass, to tell us something worthwhile, something that clarifies confusions, illuminates heretofore dark places in our science, in our histories, or in our souls, something that increases our understanding and facilitates our functioning in the world. (p. 176)

Therefore, just as one does not need to be an historian to study public address, one need not focus solely on building theory to produce a meaningful rhetorical study.

In sum, although the following rhetorical case study approach to crisis communication examines individual cases to generate an understanding of the crisis response used by each organization, it remains a valid rhetorical study. Furthermore, it should be argued that, through this study, the merging of rhetorical criticism and public relations is exemplified by this examination of individual cases, rather than that of multiple events.

## The Merging of Rhetorical Criticism and Public Relations

The typical approach to a crisis communication case study analysis is considered to be a part of public relations literature, attempting to understand how an organization suffered damage to its services and reputation due to inadequate preparation and response to the crisis. However, the following study is unique in that it takes a rhetorical, public address approach to conducting a case study. This study goes beyond seeking to understand the damage a crisis has caused and, rather, attempts to view the discourse as a crucial tool for the success of a crisis response method. According to Heath and Millar (2004):

[a] rhetorical approach to crisis [...] stresses the message development and presentation part of the crisis response. It underscores the role that information, framing, and interpretation play in the organization's preparation for a crisis, response to it, and postcrisis comments and actions. It features discourse, one or more statements made over time. (p. 5)

Therefore, the study of crisis communication in an organization can be connected to rhetorical theory via public address, as the rhetorical approach to crisis communication becomes an understanding of what needs to be said throughout the evolution of a crisis and how it must be said. As stated by Heath and Millar (2004), “[a] rhetorical perspective focuses on the meaning that is co-created or is expected of the organization in advance of a crisis, during a crisis, and after a crisis” (p. 14).

### Rhetorical Interest

The use of a rhetorical approach to crisis communication is present in this study due to the interesting sequence of events in each case, as well as the use of an almost

formulaic combination of strategies in the crisis response efforts made by British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum. Between each case, there is an unusual similarity in the organizational history preceding the explosions. In each case, lesser-known fatal incidents occurred but did not receive much, if any, media coverage until the larger fatal explosion occurred. Also, although it is unknown whether the 2005 case merely mimicked the crisis response efforts in the 2000 case, there appears to be an interesting use of a combination of crisis response strategies that merges those coined by Benoit (1997), Coombs (1999), and Hearit (1994). Not only are these strategies combined, but they are used in almost the exact same order throughout early and later crisis communication efforts suggesting that, either the later case perceived the earlier case as being effective in their efforts so they mimicked their response or, an interesting possibility exists for the merging of these three popular types of crisis communication strategies to create an overall effective model for industry-specific crises.

Furthermore, there is a common use of inclusive language present in the discourse used by both refineries. Inclusive language, in this sense, is in reference to language that creates a connection between the organization and the employees/employees' families beyond that of just employer/employee. It is the use of words such as "we," "our," and "family" to simulate this emotional closeness between the audience and the spokesperson. This rhetorical function brings about the possibility of considering the use of inclusive language as being an addition to the strategies founded by Benoit, Coombs, and Hearit.

Therefore, in order to understand how the techniques used to manage each crisis has affected the organization, particularly the stakeholders' perception of the reputations

of British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum, each instance of discourse released by the refineries must be analyzed rhetorically. Based on the rationale for this study, this analysis will lend itself to future research and a much broader analysis of crisis response strategies of industrial accidents can be studied. In this sense, this set of analyses can, in turn, be utilized to contribute to organizational strategy improvement, existing literature on crisis communication, and the merging of rhetorical criticism and public relations.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Necessary to any literature review included in a study that considers the merging of two fields is an overview of the relevant components of each field. Included in this chapter is an overview of the development of public address study, as well as an in-depth look at crisis typologies, crisis planning, communicating with stakeholders, and crisis communication strategies. It is significant to note that the study of public address alone is extensive; however, only the research that relates specifically to this study will be included in the overview. The concepts of crisis communication will be given the most attention, as the analysis of this study is primarily concerned with these elements.

#### The Development of Public Address Study

The study of public address has had its roots in history as long as public oratory has existed. Since a specific function of studying public address is to understand the event that was taking place at the time of the address, it is safe to say that studying public address gives insight into history and may be applied to the current period, as well. According to Wrage (1947), “[b]ecause speeches are instruments of utility designed in the main for the popular mind, conversely and in significant ways they bear the impress of the popular mind” (p. 30). To understand the popular mind at the moment a speech was delivered, is to understand why the content of a speech includes the elements it does. Furthermore, according to Parrish (1954):

Rhetoric deals in the main with man's motives and desires and, whether we like it or not, basic human nature has not changed essentially in two thousand years. The way to a man's heart in ancient Athens is still the way to a man's heart today. Styles and modes of speaking may change in different ages, but wherever the fundamental purpose of speaking is to influence human conduct its essence will remain the same. (p. 40)

Therefore, by understanding the changes in the production of public address and the development of new techniques to study public address, we may learn important lessons from the past. These lessons may merely be to not repeat a certain oratorical practice; however, lessons in what practices work for certain audiences may also be learned through this study. As explained by Wraga (1947), "[...] the rhetoric of public address does not exist for its own sake, that its value is instrumental, and that its meaning apart from application to something is sterile" (p. 30).

### Methods of Public Address Criticism

In order to learn lessons from instances of public address, speeches must first be analyzed, as:

[t]he interpretation of a speech calls for complete understanding of what goes into a speech, the purpose of the speech and the interplay of factors which compromise the public speaking situation, of nuances of meaning which emerge only from the reading of a speech in the light of its setting. (Wraga, 1947)

The methods for analysis have changed throughout the development of the study of public address. As the needs of the audience change, the techniques used to persuade the audience change, as well. For instance, during the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, feminist criticism was born. These methods of rhetorical criticism

include: traditional, or Neo-Aristotelian; dramatic; narrative; metaphoric; social movement; genre; ideographic; feminist; and close textual analysis.

The traditional, or Neo-Aristotelian, method of rhetorical criticism dominated speech criticism from 1925 to the 1960's, until Edwin Black and others led a movement to break away from its constraints—particularly that it was too formulaic. This form of criticism consists of analyzing a speaker's audience, emotional appeals, arguments, and arrangement of ideas, style, and delivery. Dramatic criticism is a way to analyze human symbolic interaction. According to Burgchardt (2005),

[w]hile traditional criticism seeks to understand how persuasive techniques function to bring about specific results, dramatism is more concerned with philosophical, psychological, and sociological questions: What does rhetoric reveal about human motivation, action, and linguistic reality? (p. 187)

To answer this question, the five key elements of drama, as coined by Burke (1945), are examined: act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose.

Narrative criticism assumes that “[...] stories are fundamental to communication because they provide structure for our experience as humans and because they influence people to live in communities that share common explanations and understandings” (Burgchardt, 2005). In this form of criticism, the characters, setting, plot, and theme are elements that are analyzed. Metaphoric criticism views metaphors as ornamentation that provides insight into a speaker's possible motives. According to Burgchardt (2005), “[t]he metaphoric critic focuses on describing, evaluating, and understanding such metaphors as vital rhetorical phenomena” (p. 305).

Social movement criticism was the first step in the belief that multiple speakers, audiences, and occasions could be analyzed as effectively as a single orator. Leland

Griffin made this observation in 1952 and theorized that social movements were either pro or anti movements. According to Burgchardt (2005), “[t]he rhetoric produced by such movements, he maintained, fell into corresponding phases: ‘inception,’ ‘development,’ and ‘consummation.’” (p. 355). Also examining multiple speeches and forms of discourse is genre criticism. The purpose of this is to determine the categories of rhetoric that exist.

Ideographic criticism exists to examine the centrality of ideology in discourse. Wraga was an advocate of investigating the use of ideology in discourse and, by identifying ideographs in discourse, the speaker can analyze ways that the ideographs used may reflect a speaker’s motives. Feminist criticism, on the other hand, looks at how language oppresses or marginalizes women and may further hegemonic ideals. Whereas, “[c]lose textual analysis studies the relationship between the inner workings of public discourse and its historical context in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively” (Burgchardt, 2005). So, to analyze an artifact under close textual analysis would seek to reveal the hidden mechanisms that act as a rhetorical device.

In relation to the present study, there are more recent, relevant developments in the study of public address. Namely, stemming from generic criticism research is the idea, proposed by Hikins (1996), of the creation of a possible genre of disaster rhetoric. This research shall be examined more extensively in the following section.

### Rhetoric and Disaster

In this literature review, it seems appropriate to position a section on rhetoric and disaster between that of the development of public address study and the study of crisis

communication, as the notion of the rhetoric of disaster acts as a bridge between the two fields. Because numerous rhetorical responses accompany the aftermath of a crisis, Hikins (1996) argues that rhetoric plays an “[...] indispensable role [...] in preventing unraveling of the social fabric in the face of disaster” (p. 109). Therefore, as crisis communication seeks to understand the effects of crisis response strategies on a target audience, public address seeks to understand the way that discourse is used within the crisis response strategies to meet the needs of the organization.

Hikins (1996) argues that the discourse that occurs following a disaster exists to interpret and reinterpret the traumatic event, while embedding the occurrence of the event within the audiences’ individual and collective knowledge and beliefs. In other words, disaster discourse seeks to help the audience come to terms with the crisis event by explaining it in more socially acceptable language. In order to achieve this, Hikins identifies seven functions that constitute the possibilities from which rhetors can choose when framing discursive responses. Taxonomies of these functions are: consolation, theology, prescription, heurism, didactic, preservative, and adjudicative.

The first function is that of consolation. Disaster rhetoric seeks to illustrate common socio-cultural bonds within the audience through emotions such as sympathy and empathy. By reminding the audience that suffering is communal, the sense of loss is altered as the audience is reminded that other valued entities remain unharmed. The theological function, on the other hand, is used as a way to inspire the audience and explain the disaster. In this sense, religion is used to offer the audience a source of relief and understanding, as the crisis becomes placed in the hands of a higher being, such as

God. Thus, the theological function contributes to the goal of preserving the social fabric, as the audience comes to terms with the crisis as being inevitable.

Another function of disaster rhetoric is to act as a prescription, teaching others how to act in similar situations by praising the roles played by certain actors in the crisis. Therefore, by showing members of society that certain social responses were appropriate and commendable, it should be expected that the same members of society would respond the same way if placed in a similar situation. Heurism, however, functions as a way to offer an explanation of the crisis with the notation that the crisis served a purpose and could have been worse. In this sense, heurism is quite similar to Benoit's image restoration strategy of minimization, whereas the damage from the crisis is argued to be less severe than claims argue that it may be.

Disaster rhetoric exhibits a fifth function of being didactic. The didactic function uses the tragedy to teach lessons. If the crisis occurred because of some particular reason, the audience will learn this reason and, hopefully, put into place actions to prevent another crisis from occurring. The preservative function of disaster rhetoric treats various pieces of the crises historically. With this function, the crisis is articulated in such a way where future generations will remember factual components, such as the severity, of its occurrence. Finally, the seventh function—the adjudicative function—serves as a catalyst to assess blame for the crisis. According to Hikins (1996), this function allows the repair of social fabric as it will “[...] deter future disaster insofar as the one in question is the result of human negligence” (p. 122).

In sum, it is no secret that rhetoric plays a pivotal role in the assembly and effectiveness of crisis communication. As Hikins (1996) asserts that “[...] disaster

rhetoric represents an important genre of rhetoric” as “[...] viewing disaster rhetoric from the perspective of rhetorical criticism enables us to assess the effectiveness of the genre’s discursive strategies and reveals as well the rhetorical possibilities afforded by disaster” (p. 109). Therefore, it should be argued that the study of public address is continuously growing as it reflects the change in the values of the audience and the motives of the speaker. Current studies in public address argue that oratory may not be the only object that can constitute a text, as some critics have begun to argue that images and other objects can be political in nature. However, by understanding the development of the study of public address through its methods, the connection between history and the rhetoric produced for it argues for a stronger connection between the study of crisis communication and public address. In order to understand this connection better, a discussion of crisis communication study and its components is warranted.

### Crisis Communication Study

Perrow (1984) argued that “[...] human-made catastrophes appear to have increased with industrialization as we build devices that could crash, burn or explode” (p. 9). With this onslaught of potential for tragedy, it is important to understand the relationship between communication and crisis. According to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998), “[c]ommunication is increasingly recognized as an important process in organizational crisis and crisis management” (p. 231). The body of literature concerning crisis communication demonstrates this importance as various crisis typologies as well as steps from planning how to handle a crisis before one has occurred, how to communicate

with stakeholders before, during, and after a crisis and, finally, how to respond to the crisis once it has occurred are thoroughly researched.

### Crisis Typologies

As one may imagine, the potential types of crises that any one organization may face are numerous; nevertheless, the most frequent typologies include challenge, human breakdown, malevolence, megadamage, natural disaster, organizational misdeeds, rumors, technical breakdown, and workplace violence (Coombs et al., 1995; Egelhoff & Sen, 1992; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Lerbinger, 1997; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). A challenge occurs when an organization is confronted by its stakeholders (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). When human error causes an event to occur, it is considered a human breakdown (Coombs et al., 1995). Malevolence is when an outsider to the organization employs an extreme tactic to generate change or express anger toward that organization (Egelhoff & Sen, 1992). Cases of megadamage occur when an accident causes considerable environmental damage (Fearn-Banks, 1996). When an organization is damaged by the weather or an act of God, a natural disaster has occurred (Coombs et al., 1995). Organizational misdeeds are within an organization, occurring when management takes actions it knows will place stakeholders at a risk for harm (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Another type of crisis is the rumor or dissemination of false information about an organization and/or its products (Fearn-Banks, 1996). When the technology used by an organization breaks down it is considered a technical breakdown (Lerbinger, 1997). Finally, workplace violence is when an employee (or

former employee) commits an act of violence against other employees at the organization (Coombs et al., 1995).

### Crisis Planning

Each organization is vulnerable to its own specific types of crises; however, all organizations may benefit from developing leadership skills and designating leaders to handle a crisis situation. Additionally, it would be advantage for organizations to begin planning how to respond to a crisis should one occur. Designated leaders are important to any step of crisis planning, as the individual's competence can make or break any crisis response method. According to Schoenberg (2005), "[...] it is apparent that the situation often determines the leader" (p. 3). A crisis leader for an industrial accident, for example, will need to have different skills than a leader responding to the tampering of an organization's product. Before choosing a leader for crisis response, the leaders' skill set must be evaluated, as well as their ability to influence key audiences, gain trust, and use their value set (Schoenberg, 2005).

It is worthy to note that the skills discussed by Schoenberg (2005) as necessary to a legitimate crisis response effort are based on the notion that certain leaders have the ability to connect with their audiences on various levels. In a sense, as we may often decipher the term *skill* as an ability gained by training to produce a solution to a problem, the term is used differently in crisis response. In crisis communication, the necessary skill would consist of the leader having the ability to adapt and/or relate to the audience in a way that satisfies the needs of both the audience and the organization, thus maintaining the organization's credibility.

This notion of the ability to adapt and relate to the audience for the sake of maintaining organizational credibility further justifies the rhetorical dimension to approaching a study that would otherwise be considered belonging to the field of public relations. As Aristotle argued in *Rhetoric*, the ability to persuade an audience depends on the speaker's artistic proofs otherwise known as logos, pathos, and ethos. According to Bizzell and Herzberg (2001), "[l]ogical or rational appeals stress the reasonableness of the rhetorician's argument. Pathetic appeals raise emotions favorable to the rhetorician's position. Ethical appeals raise emotions favorable to the rhetorician's moral character" (p. 171). Therefore, the goal of the crisis leader in his response messages is parallel to the artistic proofs defined by Aristotle.

Similarly, just as the designated leader and his/her skills must be different for each situation; the ideal response to a crisis must be different, as well. An ideal response would be that which successfully utilizes logos, pathos, and ethos in a way that allows the speaker to persuade the audience that the organization s/he represents should not be further scrutinized. It is a response that touches an audience in a way that they connect with the speaker, thus, minimizing damage to the credibility of an organization. In order to produce this ideal response, as part of planning for a crisis, designated leaders should be able to identify the type of crisis that has occurred and match it to possible responses for that particular crisis type. According to Coombs and Holladay (1996), "[c]risis response strategies can lessen the reputational damage by mitigating the affective feelings generated by the attributions and/or altering the attributions themselves" (p. 292). The intentionality for a crisis, as well as whether the crisis was internal or external has quite a bit to do with the preparation a leader must have in order to choose the optimal response

strategy. For example, in this study, Coombs and Holladay also note that “[t]ransgressions are perceived as more intentional than accidents, because the organization is perceived to have greater control over a transgression than an accident” (p. 293).

Coombs and Holladay (1996) urge to the merging of neoinstitutionalism, or the granting of legitimacy to an organization if stakeholders believe the organization is good, and attribution theory, or the relation of a situation and the selection of the communication strategy. This merge would be considered a symbolic approach, helping to shape an organization’s image by relating the crisis response strategy to the type of crisis that has occurred. As predicted by the symbolic approach, Coombs and Holladay found that “[o]rganizations suffered the least reputational damage when a matched crisis response strategy from the symbolic approach was used” and, “[o]rganizations that might be perceived as being able to prevent a crisis should have a more negative image than an organization perceived to have little or no control over a crisis” (p. 293). Therefore, when planning for a potential crisis, organizations should be aware of the potential for stakeholder backlash and negative image due to their perceived control over the situation.

Coombs (2004) studied the extent to which reputational threat of victimization or accidental crisis increased when the organization had similar crises occur in the past. It was hypothesized that the history of similar crises increased perceptions of crisis responsibility and intensified negative reputation perceptions of the organization. According to Coombs, “[t]he results revealed a weak link between crisis history and perceptions of crisis responsibility and a strong link between crisis history and organizational reputation in the victim and accident clusters” (p. 282). Similarly,

Coombs and Holladay (1996) had reported the connection between crisis history and organizational image stating that, “[o]rganizations with a history of many crises (poor performance history) were perceived more negatively than organizations reporting one crisis (positive performance history)” (p. 293).

Two of the most crucial phases of crisis planning are explained using a four-phase model. The four phases involve issues management, planning-prevention, the crisis, and the post-crisis. According to Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995), issues management includes scanning the organizational environment looking for trends that may be important in the future, collect and evaluate data on troublesome issues, and develop a communication strategy to concentrate on preventing the occurrence of a crisis. Planning-prevention is a time to set policies on issues, prepare contingency plans, designate members of the crisis management team, identify media/public relations representatives, determine the outlets that would be used to implement the crisis communication plan, and the options the organization can choose from in the development of a crisis plan (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

### Communicating with Stakeholders

Although part of crisis planning focuses heavily on choosing media and public relations representatives and preparing for media statements, the media are not the only public to consider. According to Fisher and Briggs (1989), there are two key publics to consider when a crisis strikes an organization: the media and the organization’s employees. Communicating with stakeholders is a large part of crisis planning as it builds a relationship between the organization and the stakeholder to help establish

credibility; however, communicating with stakeholders is also an important step to take or reinforce once a crisis has occurred. According to Schmidt (2005), “[e]mployees are a key stakeholder group that must be communicated with during a business crisis. Any company that fails to do so puts the entire crisis response at risk” (p. 8).

During an organization’s crisis, employees must be well-informed. Schmidt (2005) suggests ten steps for an organization to take to ensure effective employee communication during a crisis. These steps include:

developing and implementing a crisis communication plan, maintaining ongoing dialogue with employees long before a crisis occurs, informing employees of a crisis and what the organization is doing about that crisis before external crisis communication occurs, eradicating employee uncertainty, answering employee’s questions, creating allies by encouraging employees to speak up for the company, being consistent with sending messages, convincing employees to give feedback and paying attention to that feedback, involving senior management by allowing them to talk to distressed employees, and considering external help. (pgs. 8-9)

Similarly, Fisher and Briggs (1989) suggest that organizations strive for decentralized communication amongst management and employees, allowing a more open communication channel. The authors also advise managers to evaluate messages for relevance to what employees need to know, as well as supporting this communication with counseling and other services.

Unfortunately, since there are two key publics for crisis leaders to address in their response, challenges arise when a leader must accommodate two target audiences with differing needs. According to Stephens, Malone, and Bailey (2005), organizations often target different messages to different stakeholders. In their study, the authors found:

[...] the emphasis on rectification, bolstering, endorsement of an outside expert, transcendence, and deny volition when addressing the public

clearly demonstrates how organizations may be more concerned about maintaining reputations and public image rather than explaining, clarifying, or acknowledging the crisis at hand. (p. 409)

Furthermore, Stephens et al. contend that organizations are inconsistent when targeting their messages to different stakeholders, which may be “dangerous” when stakeholders find inconsistencies in the message strategies. With the onslaught of easily accessible technology, such as the Web, it is easy for stakeholders other than the intended recipient to retrieve various differing messages concerning the crisis.

The conclusions made by Stephens et al (2005) were similar in contention to those made by Massey (2001) in a study focusing on consistent crisis communication strategies and stakeholder relationships. According to Massey:

[t]he findings indicate that (a) consistent crisis-response strategies are more effective than inconsistent ones for legitimacy management; (b) generalist organizations are perceived as being more legitimate than specialist organizations; and (c) both generalist and specialist organizations that produce consistent crisis responses are perceived as being more legitimate than generalist or specialist organizations that produce inconsistent ones. (p. 168)

Thus, it should be concluded that stakeholder relationships are important to build and manage before a crisis should occur; however, once a crisis has occurred stakeholders should be treated with respect and crisis response messages should be consistent across varying target audiences.

### Crisis Communication Strategies

To date, quite a bit of research concerning crisis communication focuses on the strategies that organizations and, less often, individuals use to maintain or restore their image following a crisis. Crisis communication strategies and image restoration, as well

as corporate apologia are plentifully used in regard to case studies seeking to understand how organizations and individuals attempt to rebound from a crisis.

### Crisis Communication and Image Restoration

Examples of literature focusing on crisis communication and the image restoration of organizations include that of Odwalla fruit juices, Texaco, Northwest Airlines, to name a few. Literature focusing on the image restoration strategies attempted by individuals includes that of Lee Iacocca, Tonya Harding, and Oliver Stone. Research on each of these cases resulted in the idea that proper image restoration strategies change based on the crisis genre and the organization or individual's initial reputation and prior offense.

#### Image Restoration and Organizations

The first example occurred in 1996 with the Odwalla juice company. Odwalla's juices were said to be different than other manufacturers because they did not pasteurize or heat-treat the juices as this process was thought to remove flavor and nutrients. However, it was this lack of pasteurization and heat-treatment that eventually led to e.coli contamination of the juices and, ultimately, the death of a 16-month old infant and many severe illnesses across the United States and British Columbia (Thomsen & Rawson, 1998). Upon notification of the illnesses being potentially linked to their juices, Odwalla voluntarily recalled beverages and underwent a series of Benoit's (1997) techniques for image restoration. According to Thomsen and Rawson, "[...] Odwalla made effective use of bolstering, corrective action, and defeasibility in the early stages of the crisis" thus

leading to “[...] a favorable short-term resolution of the crisis and the company’s ability to maintain its goodwill” (p. 44).

Another well-known organizational crisis is that of Texaco which, also in 1996, faced a controversy concerning the release of “[...] secret tape recordings that revealed racist language used by top executives and plans to destroy evidence related to a racial discrimination lawsuit pending against Texaco” (p. 166). Coombs and Schmidt (2000) used this case in an effort to test claims advanced by Benoit’s image restoration theory by specifically studying the claims of effectiveness of various image restoration strategies employed by Texaco in this incident. The authors found that “[n]either mortification or separation were more effective than the other image restoration strategies at protecting the organizational image, winning acceptance of the account, or facilitating potential supportive behavior” (p. 173). Respondents were shown to view all five strategies used by Texaco (shifting blame, corrective action, bolstering, mortification, and separation) as positive steps taken by the organization. Coombs and Schmidt also found that shifting the blame was significantly lower than corrective action, bolstering, mortification, and separation—showing that “[d]emonstrating concern for victims and regret may be a key indicator that an organization has learned its crisis lesson” (p. 174).

Northwest Airlines (NWA) is another example of an organization faced with a crisis. In 1998, pilots of NWA went on strike, causing an estimated two million passengers to be displaced and 31,000 NWA employees to be temporarily laid off (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002). During this time, Northwest Airlines’ image restoration strategies consisted of using advertising via newspaper, radio, and television to publicly defend its position. Cowden and Sellnow analyzed these advertisements in an attempt to

understand the effectiveness of these strategies and to determine whether issues advertising could serve as a primary channel for an organization's crisis response.

In terms of Benoit's image restoration strategies, NWA's advertisements collectively used corrective action, compensation, simple denial, shifting the blame, provocation, bolstering, transcendence, attack accuser, and mortification. According to Cowden and Sellnow (2002), this issues advertising campaign was ineffective as "[t]he company conceded on nearly all of ALPA's demands; lost more than \$200 million; and, due to the increased wages paid to pilots and other personnel, has still not returned to the profit levels it enjoyed prior to the strike" (p. 209). As far as issues advertising, the authors argue that it may be an effective approach for other companies facing similar crises if the organizations could prepare in advance the use of issues advertising as a channel of communication (p. 215).

### Image Restoration and Individuals

Although research on image restoration is primarily focused on organizations, research does exist concerning the image restoration strategies used by individuals. Examples of cases concerning individuals include former figure-skater Tonya Harding and Oliver Stone. Similar to organizational image restoration research, the success of an individual's image restoration techniques is a result of the crisis type and the individual's reputation prior to the occurrence of the crisis.

One example of an individual's image restoration discourse occurred in 1994 with then-figure skater Tonya Harding presenting her case on *Eye-to-Eye with Connie Chung*. Accused of attacking her rival, Nancy Kerrigan, Harding used this popular television

program as an outlet to employ the image restoration strategies of bolstering, denial, and attacking her accuser (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). In a discussion of the implications of the analysis of techniques used by Harding, Benoit and Hanczor (1994) argue that, “[...] when one commits wrong-doing, it is often better to admit it and express remorse than to attempt to lie about it” (p. 429). Furthermore, the authors contend that a person’s lack of credibility may be worsened by attempting to lie about their responsibility for the crisis in the initial stages of response. Instead, they argue that “[a]pologizing for making a mistake and asking for forgiveness (mortification) [...], as well as making a commitment to fully cooperate with the investigation (corrective action)” would help an individual with their image (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994).

Oliver Stone also offers an example of an individual’s image restoration discourse in his defense of his film *JFK*. Stone’s film was attacked for being filled with errors, distorting reality, using poor sources for information-gathering, and was also attacked because of the conspiracy theory posited in the film. This onslaught of criticism caused Stone to respond with various forms of self-defense including attacking his accusers, bolstering, and denial (Benoit & Nill, 1998). According to Benoit and Nill, “[t]he defensive strategies were generally appropriate and the attacks failed to prevent *JFK* from attracting millions of movie-goers, provoking a public re-examination of Kennedy’s assassination, and spurring renewed calls for release of classified documents” (p. 140).

### Apologia

Another example of a crisis response strategy is corporate apologia. Although apologia shares the same etymological root as the term apology, the two are not the same

(Tavuchis, 1991). Rather, corporate apologia is seen as a self-defense tactic for organizations who have been accused of wrongdoing. According to Hearit (2001), “[...] apologiae are, at root, character-based defenses in which people measure the degree to which individuals have changed [...]” and “[...] if apologiae fail, then there are ready-made scapegoats of individuals (i.e., the CEOs) who have publicly taken responsibility for the situations” (p. 508). According to Schultz and Seeger (1991), apologia “[...] occurs when an individual rhetor speaks in self defense seeking to justify actions or salvage a damaged reputation” (p. 50). Apologists, or those who enact the strategy of apologia, use such techniques as denial, counterattack, differentiation, apology, and legal action in their crisis response (Hearit, 2001).

While the foundation for apologia, as a strategy, can be seen implicitly in literature dating as far back as Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, it has progressively been applied to organizational contexts. According to Hearit (2001), “[...] a number of theorists have argued that the nature of discourse during the 20<sup>th</sup> century changed, undergoing a paradigmatic shift from an individualist form to a corporate one” (p. 502). However, before corporate apologia can be understood, a brief discussion of its rhetorical and individualistic roots must take place.

### The Rhetorical and Individualistic Roots of Apologia

The word apologia derives from classical Greek language, as the classical Greek legal system consisted of a prosecutor delivering *kategoria* and the defendant replying with *apologia*. With this use, apologia is a formal speech used to rebut charges against the defendant. Effective apologia must embody certain elements and, as previously

mentioned, these elements are implied in literature as early as that of Aristotle. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle identifies ethos as one of the three artistic proofs a speaker must have to persuade an audience. Ethos deals with the character, or credibility, or a speaker specifically, a speaker's good will, good moral character, and sense. Considering an apologetic situation, in which an individual is charged with wrongdoing and must enact self-defense, the speaker must exhibit ethos in order to persuade the audience of his/her innocence. Contemporarily speaking, an organization must also exhibit ethos in the use of corporate apologia in order to be effective in its persuasion attempt.

In addition to the rhetorical background of apologia affirmed by Aristotle, Fisher (1970) examined apologia in terms of the situation that motivated the speaker. This concept of motivation is known as exigence in rhetorical literature. He categorized a speaker's motives into four types: affirmation, reaffirmation, purification, and subversion—all of which are concerned with an individual's image and the repair or undermining of that image. Just as Fisher's study of a speaker's motives was concerned with an individual speaker, this idea of individualism was still evident in literature published as late as the 1980's. For example, Kruse (1981), argued that three factors must be present to consider a situation to be apologetic: an ethical charge of wrongdoing, the need for purifying one's reputation as the primary reason for response, and the person being accused must deliver his/her own defense. Kruse argued that apologia can be attributed only to an individual person, as it is a response to character attacks and is only applicable to humanity.

Since the roots of apologia are in individualistic use of the strategy, it is clear that apologia was first studied by looking at individual cases. Rosenfield (1968) analyzed

dialog between Nixon and Truman and found examples of apologia in these defensive speeches. Rosenfield argued, from the results of his analysis on the Nixon-Truman dialog, that apologia is composed of: situation, evidence, previous arguments, and attacks on the accuser (p. 446). Furthermore, Ware and Linkugel (1973) categorized individualist apologetic strategies as: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence.

### Contemporary Corporate Apologia

Although Kruse (1980) argued that apologia could not be corporate, Hearit (2001) supports the idea that “[c]orporate apologiae are a response to ethical charges in which organizations have as their primary motive the defense of their reputations and to which they offer discourse in *self*-defense that explains, denies, or justifies their actions” which argues for the possibility of corporate apologia (p. 502). Benoit (1997) further supplemented this idea of corporate apologia as he refined the advances made by Ware and Linkugel (1973). Benoit (1997) developed the theory of image restoration, with the strategies categorized into three categories that are hybrids of those created by Ware and Linkugel. These categories are: denial, evasion of responsibility, and reducing the offensiveness.

An example of the use of apologia that is, in a large part, organizationally-centered is that of Lee Iacocca. With Lee Iacocca serving as a spokesperson for Chrysler, his image restoration strategies are considered to be in the realm of the individual who cannot be removed from the organization he represents. At a press conference held concerning the closing of the Kenosha, Wisconsin, Assembly Plant, Iacocca uses non-

denial and transcendence, while taking on the genre of apologia. Schultz and Seeger (1991) found that the personal image that Iacocca built with his revitalization of Chrysler did not match that of closing a major plant. This inconsistency was an unsuccessful strategy for Iacocca. Furthermore, Schultz and Seeger argue, in consistency with literature on apologia, that the effectiveness of non-denial and transcendence “[...] depends on the degree to which it can be plausibly argued that causality is beyond the organization’s control” (p. 59).

Therefore, as crisis communication literature takes its roots in rhetorical tradition, it is evident that public relations crisis response strategies cannot be separated from rhetoric. Motives are still evident in a crisis leader’s defense of the organization affected by the crisis and a crisis leader’s success in persuading their target audience is largely dependent on how these motives are delivered in crisis response via strategies used defined by Coombs, Benoit, and Hearit.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

When faced with a crisis, organizations tend to rely on strategic methods to respond to the incident. The levels of a crisis for any given organization may begin as early as pre-crisis preparation and continue during the crisis to eventually end at a post-crisis decision. Pre-crisis action strategies, as defined by Coombs (1999), include issues management, risk assessment, and stakeholder relations. During a crisis, not all organizations utilize the same response strategies. Possible responses to a crisis include those communication strategies defined by Coombs, image restoration strategies by Benoit, and Hearit's corporate apologia and any combination thereof. However, before an understanding of the crisis response methodologies can take place, we must first look at the development of the definition of *crisis* and the idea that the study of crisis communication is rooted in Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism.

#### Defining Crisis

Before a study on crisis communication can be conducted, it is important to familiarize oneself with the definition of crisis. Often in crisis communication literature, it is a common assumption that the audience has some conceptualization of what constitutes a crisis, so a standard definition is rarely, or never, given. However, according to Coombs (1999), "[h]aving a specific definition is important because how we define a subject indicates how we approach it" (p. 2). Therefore, sample definitions must be considered as well as other components of crisis, such as what constitutes a crisis and

who deems it as such. Coombs (1999) states that an option for developing a specific definition is “[...] to survey the existing definitions to develop a foundation for a viable definition” (p. 2). Therefore, we shall begin by examining three common definitions of crisis and the common traits and underlying assumptions of these definitions.

Some examples of the definition of crisis from crisis communication literature include that of Weick, Paschall, and Lerbinger. According to Weick (1988), “[c]rises are characterized by low probability of high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goal of an organization” (p. 305). Paschall (1992) contends that “[...] a crisis is simply a sudden, unexpected event that poses an institutional threat suggesting the need for rapid, high level decision-making” (p. 4). Similarly, Lerbinger (1997) defines crisis as “[...] an event that brings, or has the potential for bringing, an organization into disrepute and imperils its future profitability” (p. 4).

Some common traits emerge from these three differing definitions of crisis. The first of these traits is financial threat. The idea of an effect of a crisis on an organization’s profitability is evident in each of the definitions, even if not explicitly stated. In Weick’s definition, crisis is considered to be an event that threatens an organization’s most fundamental goal, which can be argued to be profitability, favorable stakeholder relations and organizational reputation since an organization cannot function without each of these variables. Similarly, this idea of an organizational “threat” is also in Paschall’s definition, whereby financial peril is explicitly mentioned in the definition coined by Lerbinger.

Similarly, another common trait in crisis definitions is that of a crisis being improbable, or sudden. Therefore, although an organization can prepare for potential

crises, these crises are not considered to be a likely event. The inclusion of the variable of crisis being improbable may certainly affect our understanding of crisis communication efforts produced by organizations and the lack of proper risk assessment. If an organization views the probability of a crisis occurring being less important than the cost of putting measures in place to prevent that crisis, the crisis communication effort may need to compensate for this deficiency.

Coombs (1999) attempted to define crisis in the same manner using definitions by Fink, Fearn-Banks, and Barton. Similar themes emerged in Coombs' explication of these definitions, such as a crisis being unpredictable but not expected, and a threat to create negative outcomes for an organization via financial loss, losses for stakeholders, and reputational damage. Therefore, it is evident that the similarity of themes found in two different surveys of six different common definitions of crisis argues for a working definition from an organizational standpoint of what a crisis is. This definition should consider a crisis as being an improbable threat with the potential to severely damage various aspects of an organization (such as: reputation, profitability, and stakeholder relations) unless a rapid, well-formed response is delivered to the affected audience.

### Crisis and Exigence

Another important part of defining a crisis is to determine what constitutes a crisis. One way to address this question is by looking at the debate between Lloyd Bitzer and Richard Vatz as to how we define the rhetorical situation. According to Bitzer (1968):

[a] work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. (pgs. 3-4)

Therefore, rhetorical discourse comes into existence in response to a problem—the situation exists before the rhetoric.

This situation that Bitzer speaks of consists of three parts: the rhetorical exigence, rhetorical audience, and constraints. An exigence, according to Bitzer, is “an imperfection marked by urgency” (p. 6). An exigence is rhetorical “[...] when it is capable of positive modification and positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse” (p. 7). According to Bitzer, the rhetorical audience “[...] consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and being mediators of change” (p. 8). Finally, constraints “[...] have the power to constrain decisions and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer, 1967).

Vatz, however, argues against situation-based rhetoric and for rhetor-based rhetoric, instead. According to Vatz (1973), “[...] situations obtain their character from the rhetoric which surrounds them or creates them” (p. 159). Vatz argues that there are two steps to any communicative act: choice and translation. Choice deals with the rhetor’s ability to determine which facts are to be presented, whereby translation is how these facts are to be presented and understood. For Vatz, this choice of which facts and events are relevant is arbitrary, rather than called for based on a situation’s need. Therefore, “[...] utterance strongly invites exigence” and “[...] the rhetoric controls the situational response” (Vatz, 1973).

The debate between Bitzer and Vatz on what constitutes a rhetorical situation can be applied to our discussion of what constitutes a crisis. It is arguable that Bitzer's idea of rhetorical exigence may be considered a crisis. As previously stated, an exigence is defined as an "imperfection" that is "capable of positive modification," which is similar to the idea of a crisis being improbable and in need of a well-formed response to keep an organization from being furthered harmed from its effects. A rhetor, or crisis leader, is placed at the forefront of the crisis to address stakeholders and attempt to use discourse in a way that will keep the stakeholder from developing negative perceptions of the organization. However, the discourse itself cannot dismiss the occurrence of a crisis. Regardless of what the crisis leader says during crisis response, it is still fact that an explosion has occurred and/or people have died; therefore, the discourse cannot "talk away" the crisis.

Therefore, Bitzer's argument that an exigence is real, or objective, in that it is external is congruent to the idea that the crisis exists independent of the discourse that is produced because of it. The idea that a crisis cannot be dismissed by discourse is in strong opposition of Vatz' contention that an exigence is subjective, or rhetorically constructed through talk. Consequently, crisis communication has the potential to add to the objective/subjective debate in the field of rhetoric.

### Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Criticism

Although crisis communication research is often seen as a public relations approach, it should be argued that it is rooted in rhetorical criticism. An illustration of

this argument can be made with the connection between crisis communication research and the Neo-Aristotelian, or traditional, approach to rhetorical criticism.

Just as the aim of crisis communication is to understand how an organization's crisis leaders, or spokespersons, managed the public's perception of the crisis through the use of certain methods to respond to crises, Neo-Aristotelian criticism seeks to understand the same elements. According to Hill (2005), "[a] traditional rhetorician assumes that criticism entails both explication of what went on when speakers engaged listeners or readers and evaluation of how well the speakers performed the task of changing these receivers' understanding of reality" (p. 57). Not only are the goals of Neo-Aristotelian criticism and crisis communication research the same, but the techniques used to critique and analyze the discourse produced in an event are similar, as well. Therefore, as Neo-Aristotelian criticism argues that we can evaluate a few cases and use the results of this evaluation to understand a whole rhetorical event, crisis communication analyses have made the same assumption in the method used to evaluate crisis response.

### Formulation and Evaluation

First, Neo-Aristotelian, or traditional, criticism often begins with recreating the context (physically or socially/politically), recreating the audience (forensic, legislative, or epideictic), describing the source of the message (who created the message?), analyzing the message, and evaluating the discourse (using invention, disposition, and style). Crisis communication case studies are formulated in the same way. Most of these studies begin with the explanation of the history of the event, the stakeholders and/or key

players affected by the crisis, and an analysis and evaluation of various statements made by the spokespersons of the organization. Although the categories are not labeled using the same terminology, the elements of the basic Neo-Aristotelian analysis are the same as that of the basic public relations analysis of crisis communication.

Neo-Aristotelian analysis of a message begins with obtaining the message and considering the possibilities of manipulation that may occur with that message. According to Hill (2005), “[w]e should be alert if the recording or document is available only from the source. Texts are often edited [...]” (p. 64). Therefore, it is important to obtain the primary document in which the message was released, and abstain from relying on secondary accounts of the message. Crisis communication research differs in this respect as it looks at the message as documented by various sources with the understanding that the different responses are significant. As one response may be presented to one set of stakeholders, it may be presented in a different way to another set. Furthermore, in crisis communication research, what is not said in the crisis response is equally important to what has been said.

### Invention, Disposition, and Style

Once the document(s) have been obtained, Neo-Aristotelian criticism evaluates the message under the categories of invention, disposition, and style. Invention is a measure of whether the speaker has used all of the available means of persuasion. In disposition, attention is given to the arrangement of the materials, whereby style looks at the language used in the argument. Although not the main function of crisis communication studies, these categories of Neo-Aristotelian message analysis and

evaluation are deemed an important part of understanding the success of the crisis response strategy used.

In a crisis communication study, the terms invention, disposition, and style are not used, but they are certainly discussed. Under the umbrella of invention are the Aristotelian notions of logos, pathos, and ethos. In a crisis communication incident, syllogisms are often studied when analyzing a response detailing the cause of a crisis or the emotional state of employees who have lost a coworker or family member in the crisis. For example, a syllogism used by Don Parus in a statement made in reference to the British Petroleum case is, as follows:

- Emotional overload puts employees at risk.
- Employees are in deep pain because of the incident.
- Therefore, employees are at risk.

In a crisis communication study, this syllogism may be used to discuss Parus' statement as being a blame-shifting strategy as he argues that accidents are inevitable but are greatly caused by carelessness—even if it is unintentional carelessness.

Similarly, an organization's credibility as perceived by stakeholders is often analyzed in a crisis communication case study. Looking at how an organization's crisis response affects this perceived credibility is largely a discussion of the Aristotelian notion of ethos. Furthermore, pathos is important in a crisis communication study, as the emotion behind the message often contributes to understanding a strategy such as regret or apology. Pathos is also an important component to understanding what made a crisis response technique successful, once again showing the connection between Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism and crisis communication research.

Disposition is another way to set the tone or context of the message in Neo-Aristotelian criticism. In crisis communication literature, the history portion of the study is parallel to disposition. This is the introduction of the crisis, the amount of people affected and how they are affected, as well as what measures are being taken to help control the crisis or repair the damage caused by it. It is a tactic to keep the audience involved and further connecting the crisis leader or spokesperson to their target audience.

Finally, style is the Neo-Aristotelian evaluation of the presentation of the discourse used in the message. In crisis communication literature, this is done by matching the language used to the crisis response technique. Language may be used informatively, expressively, and inclusively but its appropriateness will determine its effectiveness. Therefore, it should be argued that the way a message is presented in the event of a crisis response is just as important as what is said in the message. Once the connection between Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism and crisis communication literature is understood, the types of crisis response strategies must be overviewed. A discussion of these strategies should begin with those that are used by an organization before a crisis occurs, in hopes of preventing a potential crisis situation.

#### Coombs' Pre-Crisis Action Strategies

According to Coombs (1999), three pre-crisis action strategies exist for determining whether a crisis is likely to occur based on an organization's current state. By identifying the possible risks within an organization, crisis managers enable an organization to avoid crises by taking action to reduce these risks. These strategies are as follows: issues management, risk assessment, and stakeholder relationships.

Issues management contends that an organization can better anticipate when the organization is ripe for a crisis, by staying aware of issues as they evolve. According to Coombs (1999), “[i]ssues management can also involve changing the organization itself” (p. 41). Therefore, rather than attempting to change stakeholder opinions of a controversial issue, the organization would discontinue the cause of the issue altogether.

Risk assessment is the attempt of an organization to identify weaknesses and assess the likelihood that those weaknesses may result in a crisis. Risk management strategies are driven by cost and technical factors such as whether the risk can be eliminated or reduced. Coombs (1999) argues that organizations may not take action when the cost of risk reduction outweighs the cost of the risk itself, however “[...] ignoring risk can be a more costly move than anticipated. If stakeholders discover that their safety was sacrificed for profit, a different and much worse type of crisis erupts” (p. 43).

Finally, stakeholder relationships aid in the prevention of risks becoming a crisis. If an organization stays close in quality to its stakeholders, it will be able to identify problems at an earlier point in time and, thus, have the ability to prevent those problems from developing into a crisis. Coombs (1999) discusses the organization staying close to its customers, remaining credible and/or developing credibility, and meeting the expectations of its stakeholders as being directly involved in maintaining a positive organization-stakeholder relationship.

### Coombs' Crisis Communication Strategies

Once a crisis has occurred in an organization, how the organization chooses to respond is a large factor in determining how quickly, if at all, an organization will recover from its occurrence. Although spokesperson appearance and ability to answer questions is important, much of the success of a crisis response is in the documents and statements released in regard to the crisis. Coombs (1999) has identified four categories of crisis communication strategies that may be used in the organization's response. These categories include: nonexistence, distancing, ingratiation, and mortification.

Nonexistence strategies are generally employed when a crisis is the result of a rumor or challenge. Strategies included in nonexistence are: denial, clarification, intimidation, and attack the accuser. Nonexistence allows an organization to confront and threat force against the group or to deny the existence of a crisis and provide an explanation as to why no crisis has occurred (Coombs, 1999).

Distancing strategies are typically used when an organization has little responsibility for the crisis or if damage is minimal. These strategies include: excuse, justification, misrepresentation, minimizing injury, and deserving victim. Distancing allows an organization to minimize their responsibility for a crisis or the perceived damage of the crisis (Coombs, 1999).

In addition to nonexistence and distance strategies, organizations may use ingratiation strategies. These strategies include bolstering, transcendence, and praising others. Ingratiation allows a crisis manager to praise stakeholders and place the organization's good deeds at the forefront during any type of crisis (Coombs, 1999).

Mortification is a final series of strategies consisting of corrective redemption, repentance, and rectification. These strategies are mostly used when an organization has a history of crises or if the crisis is a result of an organizational misdeed. Mortification allows organizations to take responsibility for the crisis and repair the damage and/or take steps to prevent repeat crises (Coombs, 1999).

### Benoit's Image Restoration Strategies

Once an organization has been faced with a crisis and delivered its respective set of responses, more than finances are at stake. In many situations, organizations risk losing credibility in the eyes of the stakeholder, leaving the organization vulnerable to failure in the business industry. According to Benoit (1997), “[c]orporations may take both preventive and restorative approaches to cope with image problems” (p. 263). These image restoration approaches, as defined by Benoit, can be placed in three categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, and reducing the offensiveness.

Denial consists of simple denial and shifting the blame. Simple denial occurs when an organization refuses to take responsibility for the situation, stating that the crisis did not occur or that the organization did not perform the crisis. Shifting the blame, on the other hand, occurs when an organization places the responsibility of the situation on someone or something else. These strategies are a way for the organization to evade responsibility for the crisis and, thus, maintain or restore their current image (Benoit, 1997).

Evasion of responsibility is comprised of provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. This strategy is an organization's way to lessen the severity of the crisis

and their responsibility for it. Provocation occurs when the crisis manager for an organization reasons that its behavior is a reaction to another's offensive act.

Defeasibility argues that the accuser is lacking in proper information to make a judgment about the situation. When an organization's crisis manager claims the crisis occurred by accident, it is a way to restore the organization's image by showing that the situation was beyond its control. Finally, in some situations, organizations can claim that the incident was done with good intentions and that the negative repercussions were accidental (Benoit, 1997).

Reducing the offensiveness of the crisis is a way for organizations to repair their image by contributing to a lessened perceived offensiveness of the event. Reducing the offensiveness consists of: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation. Bolstering is a way for the organization to remind the public of the positive accomplishments of the organization, whereas minimization is an attempt to illustrate that the damage from the crisis is not as severe as claims argue that it may be. Differentiation is a comparison to a more severe situation, showing that the crisis could have been much worse. Additionally, transcendence is a strategy used to broaden the public's perspective to make the crisis appear to look smaller as compared to a larger perspective. In attacking one's accuser, on the other hand, an organization argues for the lack of credibility in an effort to show that the accuser is not trustworthy and is attempting to harm the organization for some other reason. Finally, compensation is a way for an organization to accept blame for the crisis but make a reimbursement to those who were affected, either supply-wise or monetarily (Benoit, 1997).

Two final strategies include corrective action and mortification. Corrective action is when an organization takes responsibility for a crisis and plans ways to solve the problem or prevent future occurrences thereof. In mortification, an organization confesses to being responsible for a crisis and begs for forgiveness. In both of these strategies, organizations hope that the public will pardon the wrongful act based on the organization's perceived sincerity (Benoit, 1997).

### Hearit's Corporate Apologia

Many organizations, when faced with a crisis, opt to deliver a communicative response to the occurrence of the crisis in a strategy that is meant to afford the organization a quick recovery from the incident. This particular five-strategy response type, as discussed by Hearit (1994), is known as "apologia." Apologia is a character-based defense and its success largely depends on the persona of the spokesperson.

The five strategies of apologia consist of denial, counterattack, differentiation, apology, and legal. Denial is an organization's attempt to avoid liability by stating that they are not responsible for the crisis. If an admission of guilt is present, however, it is argued that the crisis was unintentional. Counterattack is a challenge of the ethics of the accusers, arguing that the individual or group accusing the organization of wrong-doing is incorrect and that there is something wrong with that individual or group. Differentiation is the most common strategy. In differentiation, organizations distance themselves from the crisis by utilizing a scapegoat. Apology is used when an organization has no other choice but to apologize. However, organizations typically claim that they regret the incident's occurrence rather than asking the audience for forgiveness. Finally, when

threats of liability are present, the legal strategy is used. This strategy may be used in an extreme way, such as the organization not speaking about the event, or it may be used by saying as little as possible, denying guilt, shifting or sharing guilt, or suggesting that those who are bringing the charges do not have all of the necessary information to bring those charges about (Hearit, 1994).

### Data

The data used in this study consists of any oral or written statements released by the Chemical Safety Board, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, British Petroleum, and Phillips Petroleum following the occurrence of the crisis. Items for analysis in the British Petroleum case include: an oral statement to the media delivered by Don Parus, the Texas City refinery manager, on the evening the explosion occurred; a letter distributed to refinery employees by Parus approximately three hours after the oral statement was delivered; a letter from John Browne, British Petroleum's Chief Executive, inserted in copies of British Petroleum's annual sustainability report in April 2005; a speech delivered by Tony Hayward, Chief Executive of Exploration and Production, to the International Regulators' Offshore Safety Forum; a statement made by Ross Pillari, British Petroleum America's President; a statement released by BP America; a personal reflection letter to British Petroleum employees released by Parus on the day following the explosion; a statement delivered by Pillari at a press briefing following the release of the Fatal Accident Interim Report; a statement made by British Petroleum clarifying a news report made by the Houston Chronicle; a personal interview with spokesperson Hugh Depland; reports and other information releases from the British Petroleum

response website; as well as media coverage found in local newspapers quoting plant officials and spokespersons and detailing factors resulting from the explosion, such as changes in stock prices, citations given by OSHA, lawsuits and settlements, changes in operational procedure, and stakeholder responses..

In regard to the Phillips Petroleum case, the following items were used in the analysis: an oral statement delivered by plant general manager Jim Ross and spokesperson Norm Berkley on the evening of the explosion; a statement to the public made by Ross; a statement to the public delivered by Berkley; a written statement released by spokesperson Kevin Collins on the day following the explosion; a written statement released by Berkley on the same day as Collins' statement; an oral statement made by James J. Mulva, chairman and chief executive officer of Phillips Petroleum Co., in a visit to the site of the explosion; written statements made by spokesperson Jere Smith; two statements delivered by Ross following the release of the preliminary investigation report; a statement made by spokesperson Mike Catt; as well as media coverage found in local newspapers quoting plant officials and spokespersons and detailing factors resulting from the crisis, such as citations given by OSHA, settlements arrived through lawsuit, and stakeholder responses.

### Procedures

In the following analyses, risk assessment and Coombs' pre- and post-crisis strategies are studied through the statements made by the Chemical Safety Board, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, as well as statements from spokespersons from each refinery regarding the technological state before and during the

explosions. Additionally, data concerning stakeholder response and corrective actions taken by each refinery is used to gauge the extent of the damage incurred by each organization, contributing to an analysis of post-crisis actions.

Immediately following the pre-crisis risk assessment, each refinery's crisis response is divided into two categories: the early and later stages of crisis communication. The early stages category is all of the crisis communication conducted before the release of a report indicating the probable cause of the explosion. As follows, the later stages category consists of all of the crisis communication conducted following the release of the investigation reports. The division of early and later stages of crisis communication is logically made, as it is inferred by the author that the release of a report detailing the cause of the crisis will significantly impact an organization's crisis response. Upon categorizing the crisis communication efforts, all communication correspondence items released by each refinery regarding the respective explosions will be examined using the crisis communication strategies defined by Coombs, Benoit, and Hearit.

## CHAPTER IV

### CASE STUDY ANALYSES

#### British Petroleum Case History

According to British Petroleum (2005a), the Investigation Team identified at least 15 hydrocarbon leaks, vapor releases, and/or fires in the Isomerization Unit from 1986 through 2005, citing that incident records are “less than complete,” as “[i]ncident records before 1999 were difficult to locate apart from logs from the site Fire Department” (p. 8). Perhaps most notable are the two incidents that occurred less than a month before the March 23, 2005 explosion. In February 2005, British Petroleum cites an incident in which liquid hydrocarbons leaked into the sewer during a de-inventory of the Raffinate Splitter. In addition to this, a fire broke out as a  $\frac{3}{4}$  valve on a furnace line caught fire on March 22, 2005, hours before the explosion occurred. According to Aulds (2005a), British Petroleum officials “[...] downplayed any direct connection between the small blaze and the blast [...]” (p. 1).

Details surrounding the March 23 explosion are plentiful. As previously stated, the explosion occurred at approximately 1:20 p.m. at British Petroleum’s Isomerization Unit. According to Moran (2005), the blast rattled homes as far as 5 miles away and covered the skies in ash and debris at the refinery complex located off of Texas 146 (p. 4). According to Aulds, T. J., Huron, D., Smith, N., Williams, S., & Viren, S. (2005), and an alert summary provided by the NC4 Incident Monitoring Center (2005), the massive plume of black smoke sent into the air by the explosion prompted Texas City Emergency Management to issue a shelter-in-place order for the city and declared the

explosion a level 3 alert at 1:28 p.m. At 2:10 p.m., the city lifted the shelter-in-place order and reduced the alert to a level 2. Approximately five minutes later, city first responder units called for backup and additional ambulances from across the county. At 3:22 p.m., the British Petroleum fire crews doused the fire and by 3:30 p.m. the rescue and recovery mission began. During this time period, the Texas Department of Transportation temporarily closed all eastbound lanes of FM 1764 and FM 519 entering Texas City. In addition to this, local school facilities were locked down and several nearby buildings and vehicles were greatly damaged by the explosion. By 7 p.m., British Petroleum officials had confirmed at least 14 dead and more than 70 company employees injured, but cautioned that both totals could rise (pgs. 1-6). Additionally, one oil refinery worker had not been accounted for by 7:18 p.m.

Aulds, T. J., Huron et. al. (2005) also accounted for the hospital admissions of workers and community members. As of 8 p.m., 22 patients were admitted to University of Texas Medical Branch: three in critical condition, three in serious condition, and 16 in fair condition. At Clear Lake Regional Medical Center, 120 patients were seen, 45 were treated and released, 2 were admitted, and the remainder was still in process. Finally, 59 patients were admitted and reported in fair condition at Mainland Medical Center. Additionally, one man was taken by helicopter to Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston, Texas (p. 5). According to Viren (2005), one of the trailers at the plant lost all of its windows to the explosion, while all workers inside of the trailer “[...] had their faces sliced by shards of glass” (p. 1).

According to Moran (2005), the missing worker was found dead in the plant’s rubble on March 24, bringing what would eventually become the final death toll to 15.

As of this date, Galveston County Chief Medical Examiner Stephen Pustilnik identified six of the victims and it was reported that two of the victims' families identified the bodies by visual inspection (p. 2). Moran also reported that British Petroleum said that at least some of the dead were contractors from J.E. Merit, a subsidiary of Jacobs Engineering of Pasadena, California. Jacobs confirmed that 11 of its employees died in the explosion. It was later reported that Fluor Corporation lost three workers in the explosion. Additionally, Moran states that "[t]he price of oil used to manufacture gasoline climbed today despite BP's assurances that supplies were in no danger [...]" (p. 5). Newratings (2005) also reported a rise in crude oil prices, stating that they "[...] climbed more than \$1 per barrel on Thursday, following the news of a fatal blast at a Texas refinery" (p. 1). Williams (2005a) also reported:

[t]he BP explosion helped trigger an overnight rally in energy futures as traders worried about the loss of gasoline supplies ahead of the summer driving season. April gasoline futures closed 2.43 cents higher at \$1.599 a gallon, after climbing to a record high of \$1.608 a gallon in overnight trade following news of the BP refinery fire. (p. 2)

Also on March 24, State District Court Judge Susan Criss issued a temporary restraining order barring British Petroleum, its affiliates, and government officials from disturbing the explosion site or beginning cleanup.

On March 25, the Galveston County Medical Examiner released the names of all 15 people killed in the explosion after identifying the remains of the victims through "[...] fingerprint analysis, dental records and visual identifications" (Williams, 2005b). In reference to the hospitalized blast victims, as of March 26, Williams also reported that of the 60 that Mainland Medical Center treated, 53 had been released and six remained in the hospital. The man who was flown to Memorial Hermann Hospital was taken to Ben

Taub Hospital, also in Houston, Texas, but no condition report was available. Of the 23 treated at Clear Lake Regional Medical Center, two were admitted to the hospital and were listed in stable condition. Finally, of the 23 admitted to University of Texas Medical Branch, nine had been discharged, seven were in critical condition, and seven were in good condition. According to Carson (2005), the U.S. Chemical Safety Board and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration were investigating the explosion and, while the cause had not yet been pinpointed, British Petroleum ruled out the possibility of the explosion being the result of a terror attack.

Blunt force trauma was cited as the cause of the deaths, with blast injuries also playing a role in all but one of the deaths according to the final autopsy reports that were released during the week of June 15, 2005. Smoke inhalation was listed as another factor in the death of one of the workers, as well. All of the 15 workers that were killed were contract workers for J.E. Merit and appear to have been killed instantly (Smith, 2005).

At a news conference held on May 17, 2005, Ross Pillari, president of BP Products North America, Inc. discussed the release of British Petroleum's Fatal Accident Investigation Report. According to Pillari (2005b), the blast was caused by "surprising and deeply disturbing" staff errors and stated that supervisors and hourly workers face disciplinary action ranging from written reprimands to termination. According to Easton (2005), Pillari stated:

[...] supervisors seemed to be absent at times during the startup, meaning crews didn't know who was in charge, and supervisors and workers failed to follow written procedures [...] and that [...] there was a six minute window when any of six supervisors could have sounded an emergency alarm to evacuate the area, but that alarm was never sounded. (p. 1)

It was also reported that union leaders and victims are claiming that the report is an illustration of British Petroleum scapegoating low- and mid-level workers and ignoring management responsibility for the explosion. According to Aulds (2005h), “[t]he union contends that the company spent more time blaming workers than facing up to its own missteps” (n.p.). As of June 22, 2005, in an effort to take responsibility for the incident, British Petroleum reached settlement with many of the lawsuits that were served against them on behalf of the workers that were killed and severely injured. Confidentiality agreements have restricted the release of information on how much money British Petroleum paid the injured workers and the families of the deceased (Aulds, 2005b).

#### British Petroleum Stakeholders

As the history of this crisis unfolds, it is clear that the stakeholders of this organization are, as follows: British Petroleum and its employees; the employees of contracting firm Jacobs Engineering Group/J.E. Merit; the families of the deceased victims and the injured workers of past and present British Petroleum crises; the Texas City, Texas community; the British Petroleum stockholders (ticker: BP.NYS); and the United States citizens who utilize crude oil.

British Petroleum and its employees are stakeholders due to the fact that the organization is impacted financially along with their image. As accidents at the Texas City plant are not few, especially in the past year, the families of British Petroleum employees and the employees themselves are stakeholders in the fight for safety. Jacobs Engineering Group/J.E. Merit becomes a stakeholder as their contracted employees are

shared with the British Petroleum plant and are at risk for injury. Based on the damage done to nearby homes and the possibility of unhealthy toxins being present in the air, the citizens of Texas City and its surrounding areas are all affected by an explosion of this magnitude. As stated earlier, British Petroleum stockholders reacted quickly to news of the explosion because of the possibility of an escalation in crude oil prices, showing the importance of their status as stakeholders. Finally, the United States citizens who utilize crude oil are considered stakeholders in this case, as they make up much of British Petroleum's success and had to face an increase in crude oil prices as these prices climbed more than \$1 per barrel just two days after the explosion (Newratings, 2005).

#### British Petroleum Key Players

Several key players exist in the British Petroleum tragedy. In any organizational crisis, a spokesperson must be present to handle inquiries from the media and the stakeholders. It is apparent that, as this crisis unfolds, there are several different spokespersons representing British Petroleum, J.E. Merit, as well as the victims of the explosion and their families.

British Petroleum's Texas City Refinery Manager Don Parus served as the initial spokesperson for the company. In his exchanges with the media and the employees of British Petroleum, he details the incident and confirms fatalities. British Petroleum Chief Executive John Browne (sometimes referred to as Lord Browne) serves as an international spokesperson and contacts employees and also provides statements to the media. Once an investigation report was released, BP Products North America President, Ross Pillari; the new Texas City Refinery Manager, Colin Maclean; and General

Manager of Public Affairs, Hugh Depland, began to serve as spokespersons for the company during press briefings. Rod Sharp serves as a main spokesperson for J.E. Merit but declines to discuss the explosion in many articles. Sharp only provides confirmation for the fatalities belonging to J.E. Merit.

In addition to the aforementioned spokespersons, the United States Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board have investigated whether state and federal regulations protect workers in cases like this. The United States Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board's investigation is led and discussed to external audiences by their spokesperson, Angela Blair. Along with this investigation, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration have conducted an investigation and prepared a 100 page report, with Charles Williams serving as a spokesperson for their organization. Finally, several law firms in the state of Texas have begun to handle cases on behalf of workers killed or injured in the explosion. These lawyers include Brent Coon, Terry Bryant, and Williams Bailey.

#### Pre-Crisis Risk Assessment

The opportunity for British Petroleum to use risk assessment to identify the possibility of the occurrence of this explosion was present. According to British Petroleum (2005c), at the time of the explosion “[t]he Isomerization unit was undergoing a scheduled maintenance plan called a ‘turnaround’. The unit was in the process of being restarted after undergoing a two week work program” (p. 1). Additionally, Aulds (2005c) cites Brown as saying that the unit had been taken off and reconditioned and was being brought online at the time of the explosion. Aulds also quotes John Miles, regional

director for Occupation Safety and Health Administration, as saying that this particular period “[...] is a time when it’s very vulnerable,” and that “[i]t’s a critical time” (p. 2).

Evidence for the vulnerability of the unit in this particular maintenance plan is illustrated by Angela Blair, lead investigator for the Chemical Safety Board. In a statement made by Blair cited by CBS News (2005), she argues that “[h]istory has shown that many of these kinds of accidents tend to happen before, during or after a maintenance turnaround” (p. 1). CBS News (2005) also reports that “[a]n explosion happened during a maintenance period the same time last year, but no one was injured” (p. 1). Therefore, it can be argued that British Petroleum had the necessary information contending that maintenance periods are weaknesses in the unit and could easily cause a crisis. Since an explosion had previously occurred at their plant during this turnaround, British Petroleum should have assessed this risk and taken the necessary preventative precautions.

### Crisis Communication and Management

Crisis communication and management begins with the initial response from the representatives of an organization and continues with each statement and action delivered by these representatives throughout the period following the crisis. Although first impressions are often considered the most important, an organization must be cautious in their response. An organization’s spokespersons should be consistent with their initial responses throughout the stages of crisis communication in order to maintain a positive image in the eye of the stakeholder.

British Petroleum is generally consistent with the communication strategies that they employ throughout the duration of the crisis. From the initial response to the early stages of crisis communication, defined as those statements made before the release of the Fatal Accident Interim Report, British Petroleum frequently uses Coombs' ingratiation and excuse, Hearit's apology/regret, and Benoit's corrective action and bolstering. However, following the release of the Fatal Accident Interim Report, labeled the later stages of crisis communication, British Petroleum moves into full image restoration through the use of Benoit's full apology and compensation, accident, and corrective action strategies.

### The Initial Response

In times of crisis, the initial response made by a spokesperson is crucial to the public and stakeholders' perception of the organization. According to Coombs (1999), "[c]risis managers are encouraged to be quick, consistent, open, sympathetic, and informative" (p. 114). Clearly, first impressions are everlasting and must be handled with care. British Petroleum's initial response to the public occurred at 7:29 p.m. (CT) and was delivered by Don Parus, the Texas City refinery manager in the form of a written statement distributed by PR Newswire.

Parus begins the response with expressing the sorrow that he and British Petroleum are experiencing concerning the crisis. Parus (2005c) states, "[w]ords cannot begin to express how I and the people of BP feel right now. This is an extremely sad day for Texas City and BP" (n.p.). He also uses this response to provide information about the explosion, detailing the time that the explosion occurred and the time that the fire was

extinguished. The process of accounting for workers and an unofficial fatality and injury report is discussed, as well. Finally, Parus continues by discussing actions that are being taken by British Petroleum, specifically:

[w]e are providing employee assistance program (EAP) counseling and pastoral help to responders, employees, workers, and families. We are continuing to work to account for all personnel. We are continuing to secure affected areas, and helping ensure that proper humanitarian assistance is available at the site and area hospitals. We are also calling more people to help. The company also is working with officials to mobilize the incident investigation team. (n.p.)

This initial response follows the guidelines given by Coombs in that it is quick, sympathetic, and informative based on the above-detailed summary.

### Early Stages of Crisis Communication

#### Ingratiation and Excuse

In a letter to refinery employees written by Don Parus and released at 10:16 p.m. (CT) on the day of the explosion, ingratiation and excuse are embedded in the expression of sorrow for the loss and injury of workers. Parus (2005a) writes, “[w]e have made strides in safety and felt we were making progress. These events must remind us that whatever we have done it is just not enough” (p. 1). In many ways, this statement serves as a combination of ingratiation and excuse as Parus reminds employees of the improvements in safety that have been made while, at the same time, arguing that even these improvements could not keep the tragedy from happening, thus excusing British Petroleum from the ability to control the event.

It is worthy to note that, embedded in this act of ingratiation and excuse is the use of inclusive language, such as referring to employees and management collectively as “we,” “family,” etc. The use of inclusive language allows British Petroleum to set a common ground between the speaker and audience, connecting an otherwise divided audience. Parus establishes this common ground using the word “family.” According to Parus (2005a), “[m]ere words are inadequate to describe the tragedy that struck the BP Texas City family Wednesday afternoon” (p. 1). Additionally, he states “[o]ur loss is full and personal [...]” (p.1). He then continues to use further inclusive language as he suggests, “[w]e must spend the time ahead watching out for one another and allowing each of us to work out our feelings in our own way. It is vital that we do not let this emotional overload put any more of us at risk” (p. 1). By using words such as “our” and “we,” Parus establishes a common ground of the audience, showing that he is feeling the same emotions and is grieving in the same way as they are.

Additionally, British Petroleum’s annual sustainability report had gone to press prior to the explosion. Upon delivery of the report, a letter from John Browne was inserted into copies. This letter, dated April 2005, was similar in pattern to Don Parus’ letter to employees in that it combined ingratiation and excuse in a simple statement. Browne (2005b) writes, “[t]his incident comes at a time when BP’s overall safety record has been on an improving trend. It is a forcible and tragic reminder of how things can go wrong, and how safety is something which has to be newly secured every day” (p. 1). Once again, this strategy allows Browne to remind stakeholders of the positive accomplishments that British Petroleum has made, while showing that these

accomplishments could not prevent the explosion, once again excusing British Petroleum from the ability to control the incident.

In a March 24 statement to the media given by Chief Executive John Browne, ingratiation is employed as Browne reminds the public of the positive measures taken by British Petroleum during the crisis. In reference to British Petroleum, Browne (2005a) states:

[u]nder the most difficult of circumstances they kept the rest of the refinery safe. They contained the incident, extinguished the fire, stabilized and arranged for the transport of the injured to the hospital, accounted for those working in the facility at the time of the explosion and provided information and support to concerned family members” (p. 1)

Using this strategy in this way allows British Petroleum to appear to be successful in times of crisis and to have the ability to sustain what could have easily become a larger crisis.

Similarly, in a speech delivered to the International Regulators’ Offshore Safety Forum in London, Tony Hayward, Chief Executive of Exploration and Production uses ingratiation to incorporate the Texas City, Texas, explosion into a speech about British Petroleum’s safety. Hayward (2005), discusses the improvement of British Petroleum’s safety record by arguing:

[...] our safety performance has improved significantly, though not as far as we would wish. However, compared with 1999, not only are fewer people being harmed, but we have achieved a significant reduction in the number and severity of incidents (p. 1)

Along with this statement, Hayward goes on to detail safety record improvement ratings and the implementation of standards and programs to improve safety. Considering that this speech is being delivered to stakeholders at a convention, it is a prime example of

ingratiation, highlighting the positive achievements of British Petroleum to overshadow the threat to safety that has occurred.

### Apology/Regret

British Petroleum America's President, Ross Pillari, arrived in Texas City on March 24, 2005 to visit the site of the explosion. During this visit, Pillari issued a quick statement of apology to the media. In this statement, Pillari (2005a) says, "I am here today to express BP's deep regret over yesterday's accident" (p. 1). Similarly, in a question and answer session following Browne's statement to the media, Browne replies to one question stating that British Petroleum regrets all of the incidents that have occurred this year. Additionally, apology is also used in a letter to employees signed by Browne and distributed on March 24. Browne (2005c) ends the letter with the following statement: "[o]n behalf of BP, I express my own deep regret for this tragedy" (p. 1). The coupling of apology and regret in this stage of crisis communication is used as a strategy by British Petroleum to avoid asking for forgiveness, while giving the illusion that they are doing so to their stakeholders.

### Corrective Action and Bolstering

Corrective actions were employed by British Petroleum as early as six hours after the explosion occurred. By 7:10 p.m., a set of phone numbers were released for family members to call to retrieve information about the explosion and their loved ones. A property claims number was also released for those community members whose property was damaged by the explosion. Support personnel were made available to provide

assistance to the victims' relatives and hotel accommodations were provided for families who had traveled to the area (British Petroleum, 2005c). By the following day, British Petroleum set up a website (<http://www.bpresponse.org>) to relay information about the explosion to community members and other stakeholders. This website has boosted British Petroleum's availability to stakeholders through the inclusion of press releases, incident fact sheets, videos and, most importantly, a questions/comments form where inquiries about specific information concerning the explosion can be answered by British Petroleum spokesperson, Hugh Depland.

In addition to the early corrective actions, the corrective action strategy is used in conjunction with ingratiation in the earlier mentioned statement to the media given by John Browne. Browne (2005a) says, "[f]inally, I am here to assure those who work in the Texas City refinery and those who live in the community that we will leave nothing undone in our effort to determine the cause of this tragedy and prevent similar events in the future" (p.1). Browne, although not yet taking corrective action, vows to do so in order to prevent similar tragedies. Moreover, in an investigation update, Depland (2005) states that, in addition to mourning those whose lives have been lost, "[...] we are determined to learn from this tragedy and make our sites safer places to work" (p. 1).

Also, in a statement released by BP America (2005), corrective action is illustrated as British Petroleum lists the steps they have taken to reinforce safety and prevent similar incidents from occurring. The actions employed include a review of every process unit's safety protection system, a relocation of personnel from trailers within 500 feet of blowdown stacks and flares, relocation of those whose jobs do not

require them to be located near refinery equipment, improved internal emergency communication, and a review of all safety emergency systems (p.1).

Bolstering is also evident in the early stages of crisis communication, as a personal reflection letter from Don Parus to British Petroleum employees dated March 25, 2005 illustrates. In this letter, Parus (2005b) says, “Texas City Mayor Matt Doyle stood by Group Chief Executive John Browne and publicly praised BP, the Texas City site and our work to contain this emergency, care for the injured and prevent further damage to the community” (p. 1). He goes on in the letter to say, “[w]e have been making good improvement in our safety and we do not want to lose these gains” (p. 2). By highlighting the praise of the mayor and the improvement in the company’s safety record, Parus uses bolstering to remind the employees of the positive occurrences within the organization.

### Later Stages of Crisis Communication

#### Full Apology and Compensation

Following the release of the Fatal Accident Interim Report, Ross Pillari delivered a statement at a press briefing. In this statement, Pillari quickly changed his apology strategy from solely a regret-filled tactic to a statement of regret followed by a full apology with remarks on compensation. According to Pillari (2005b), “We regret that our mistakes have caused so much suffering. We apologize to those who were harmed and to the Texas City community” (p. 2). This statement now moves British Petroleum into accepting full responsibility for the explosion.

In addition to this, Pillari (2005b) states that “[...] we can assure that those who were injured and the families of those who died receive financial support and compensation. Our goal is to provide fair compensation without the need for lawsuits or lengthy court proceedings” (p. 2). Pillari goes on to discuss how British Petroleum has begun contacting families and is attempting to expedite and simplify the settlement process. Therefore, in this statement, Pillari is publicly stating that the organization takes full responsibility for the explosion and asks for forgiveness while providing compensation to restore the public’s image of British Petroleum.

Also, in a statement made by British Petroleum clarifying a news report made by the Houston Chronicle, a full apology is issued for mistakes made in the language used by British Petroleum’s spokespersons to describe the causes of the incident. British Petroleum (2005b) says, “[i]n speaking about the report, we have sometimes described the immediate critical factors as root causes. This has caused some confusion, for which we apologize” (p. 1). Although this is not a direct apology in response to the occurrence of the crisis, it is an apology for the discourse that has been used in statements concerning the incident.

### Accident

Pillari (2005b) turns to a description of the conclusions of the investigation and cites worker error as a cause for the explosion. In this sense, Pillari uses the accident strategy, citing that the incident was a result of worker misdeeds but was not intentional. According to Pillari (2005b), “[i]f ISOM unit managers had properly supervised the startup or if ISOM unit operators had followed procedures or taken corrective action

earlier, the explosion would not have occurred” (p. 3). He also uses the word “mistake” in his explanation of the sources of the tragedy specifically stating that “[t]he mistakes made during the startup of this unit were surprising and deeply disturbing. The result was an extraordinary tragedy” (p. 4). Based on this statement, Pillari allows British Petroleum to take responsibility for the tragedy but reinforce the idea that the explosion was unintentional.

### Corrective Action

The final strategy employed by British Petroleum after the release of the Fatal Accident Interim report is corrective action. In the aforementioned statement made by Pillari, corrective action is a clear task as causes for the explosion are determined and could have been prevented. Pillari (2005b) discusses actions that British Petroleum has taken to prevent similar crises in the future. These actions include the prohibition of occupancy of trailers within 500 feet of stacks and flares, the removal of non-essential personnel from the site, a new facility siting study to be led by a third party, the requirement of the presence of supervisors at their units when complex operations are underway, documented handover discussions for shift changes, the elimination of heavier than air hydrocarbon vapors from stacks at the Texas City, Texas and Whiting, Indiana refineries, a modification of the 12 units, and a comprehensive examination of all process related atmospheric relief systems at all BP-operated refineries. Additionally, British Petroleum is reportedly in the process of signing a contract to locate British Petroleum and up to 500 of its employees and contract workers into the former Big Kmart building, rather than having them located in trailers around the plant. By moving contract workers

into this building, corrective action is being taken as the cause of the explosion was, presumably, due to exhaust from idle trailers that the workers were staying in, igniting the vapors from the stacks. According to Aulds (2005d), “[t]he move is part of BP’s reaction to the March 23 explosions at its Texas City refinery” (p. 1).

In addition to safety procedures implemented as corrective action, Pillari discusses disciplinary action to be taken against employees responsible for the explosion. Pillari (2005b) says:

[...] we have begun disciplinary action against both supervisory and hourly employees directly responsible for operation of the Isomerization Unit on March 22 and 23. As our investigation continues, and as our understanding of what happened and why improves, we may be required to discipline others. The actions taken will range from warnings to termination of employment. (p. 9)

By issuing disciplinary action against the employees the organization has deemed as being responsible for the incident, British Petroleum shows that they are taking action against the possibility for a similar occurrence in the future.

Finally, British Petroleum has begun its settlements with the injured and families of the deceased. According to Aulds (2005b), 10 of the 12 cases that Attorney Joe Jamail is handling have been settled, with the other two close to being settled. At the time of research for this study, about five other cases were close to settlement, as well. A quick settlement is meant to allow British Petroleum to restore their image and continue with its normal operations as quickly as possible.

### Phillips Petroleum Case History

According to Staff and Wire Reports (2000a), the site of the March 27, 2000, explosion at Phillips Petroleum was the same unit that killed two workers and injured four others in June of 1999 (p. 11). Furthermore, on October 23, 1989, 23 people were killed and 130 workers injured when a series of explosions in a polyethylene reactor occurred. Notably, as a result of an investigation of the October 1989 incident by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, it was [...] found that four highly flammable gases escaped from an open valve, forming a huge vapor cloud that traveled through the plants within seconds because of high pressure. A series of explosions occurred after something ignited the cloud” (Staff and Wire Reports, 2000a). Additionally, there was no record of backup protection such as a double valve to ensure against valve failure being used in the unit.

Based on this information, it can be inferred that Phillips Petroleum is familiar with malfunctions and explosions occurring in their Pasadena plant, particularly reoccurring in the same K-Resin unit. As previously stated, the March 27, 2000 explosion occurred at approximately 1:22 p.m. at Phillips Petroleum’s K-Resin unit. According to Rendon (2000d), “[t]he tank was one of four 10,000-gallon-capacity dry butadiene tanks clustered in the center of the K-Resin unit, on the north side of the 640-acre Phillips complex on Texas 225” (p. A1). Rendon, Bryant, Hopper, and Antosh (2000) report that huge flames erupted after the blast, “[...] sending a massive column of black smoke upward and spurring area school officials to seal their buildings and keep children inside as a precaution against the possibility of toxic fumes” (p. A1).

Plant alarms sounded but, due to repairs being made to the local siren system, the city of Pasadena's siren system did not alert residents until 1:45 p.m. A total of 23 campuses in the Pasadena school district and eight schools in the Galena Park district followed shelter in place procedures until the all-clear was given for area schools and homes at 3:25 p.m. According to Rendon et al. (2000), "Pasadena school buses, meanwhile, were used to help evacuate employees and take them to the credit union, where supervisors conducted a head count. They were taken back to the plant about 4 p.m. to get their vehicles" (p. A1). The fire was finally extinguished shortly before 5 p.m. Additionally, the body of a missing employee was discovered five hours after the accident occurred (Nichols, 2000a).

According to Stack (2000), Phillips Petroleum Spokesperson Norm Berkley stated that the Pasadena plant employs about 850 people, 600 of which would have been on duty at the time of the explosion (n.p.). Of the 600 workers, one was killed and 71 were injured due to burns, smoke inhalation, cuts from flying debris, and other injuries and were sent to area hospitals for treatment and evaluation. According to White (2000), of the 71 injured, 32 were employees of Phillips Petroleum, while 39 were employees of the H.B. Zachry contracting firm.

As of Tuesday, March 28, 2000, five workers remained in critical condition at Hermann Hospital with burns over 35 percent to 70 percent of their bodies, four other patients at Hermann were listed in serious but stable condition with burns ranging from 15 percent to thirty percent of their bodies, and five were treated and released (Bryant, 2000). Twenty-seven patients were taken to Bayshore Medical Center for treatment, where only two remained under observation and in stable condition. Twelve patients

were treated and released at East Houston Regional Medical Center, and nine patients were taken to Ben Taub, where three remained in fair condition (Bryant, 2000).

On April 14, 2000, District Judge Harvey Brown Jr. issued a two-week long restraining order to ensure that evidence from the explosion is preserved. According to Rendon (2000b):

Brown ordered that no evidence or documents concerning the explosion be altered, destroyed or disrupted [...]. The restraining order also bars Phillips from destroying, altering or moving any equipment damaged in the blast without giving 48 hours' notice to the plaintiff's attorneys or their agents and giving them an opportunity to inspect and photograph the equipment. (p. A35)

The restraining order was sought in response to allegations that a Phillips supervisor and engineer tampered with a lockbox in a secured area of the plant. It is possible that this lockbox would contain data that may help explain the cause of the explosion.

Rendon (2000c) states that, as of April 14, 2000, prosecutors argued that it would be premature to begin their investigation of the explosion until the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the FBI have completed their investigation (p. A36). However, on April 15, 2000, Phillips Petroleum officials argued that “[a] chemical reaction created by residue at the bottom of a storage tank is the ‘most plausible’ cause” for the deadly explosion (Asher, 2000). According to Esposito and Ledson (2000), “[t]he tank in question had been shut down for routine maintenance. Workers had thought the tank was empty” (p. 6). The K-Resin unit was closed pending further investigation.

On September 21, 2000, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration proposed fining Phillips Chemical Co. \$2.5 million for the explosion, although the company said it would vigorously appeal the citations. According to Rendon, Sixel, and

Moreno (2000), “OSHA’s proposed fine included \$2.1 million for 30 alleged willful violations for failure to train plant operators and \$280,000 for four willful violations of process safety management and lockout/tagout standards” (p. A1).

It was also reported that attorneys representing a family in a wrongful-death case against Phillips Petroleum argued that “Phillips Petroleum Co. is engaged in a cover-up and needs to change the way it does business [...]” (Mack, 2000). As of January 3, 2002, Phillips Petroleum agreed to pay more than \$2.1 million in penalties for both safety and health violations at its complex. They also “[...] agreed to retain the services of both a process safety management training and operating procedures consultant” and “[...] implement all feasible recommendations of the consultants by July 21, 2002” (Wright, 2002).

#### Phillips Petroleum Stakeholders

As told by the history of this crisis, Phillips Petroleum stakeholders are, as follows: Phillips Petroleum Co. and its employees; the employees of contracting firm H.B. Zachry; the families of the deceased victim and the injured workers of past and present Phillips Petroleum crises; the Pasadena, Texas, area community; the Phillips Petroleum stockholders (ticker: P), and the United States citizens who utilize products made with butadiene.

The larger Phillips Petroleum Corporation is a major stakeholder, as the organization’s image is impacted by crises such as this explosion, causing them to be at-risk for financial dilemmas. The employees of Phillips Petroleum are stakeholders based on the idea that the organization is, in many ways, responsible for their well-being. As

accidents at this particular Phillips Petroleum plant are reoccurring, the families of Phillips Petroleum employees are stakeholders, as there is a possibility that their family members may not return home. Contracting firm H.B. Zachry is a stakeholder due to the fact that over half of the employees injured by the explosion belonged to their firm and are at risk for future refinery explosions at Phillips Petroleum.

Additionally, the damage caused by the explosion to nearby homes, as well as the possibility of unhealthy toxins being present in the air enables Pasadena, Texas, and its surrounding areas to become stakeholders. Phillips Petroleum stockholders also serve as notable stakeholders, as they have a considerable amount of financial control over the organization. According to Antosh (2002), “[s]hares of Phillips were down 35 cents to close at \$59.77 on the New York Stock Exchange” following notification of the \$2.1 million settlement of the March 27, 2000, explosion case. Finally, the United States citizens who utilize products made with butadiene are considered stakeholders in this case, as they must incur a possible rise in prices of these products, following an explosion of this magnitude. Since Phillips Petroleum is a leading manufacturer of this chemical, it is fair to say that the possibility for a loss in productivity could result in a rise in existing product prices.

#### Phillips Petroleum Key Players

The Phillips Petroleum explosion crisis impacted the Pasadena, Texas, community in such a way that caused the local community and news media to search for answers and more information. Various spokespersons representing Phillips Petroleum

Co., H.B. Zachry, and the victims of the explosion and their families are present within the media coverage of this crisis.

Phillips Petroleum's Pasadena plant General Manager Jim Ross and Norm Berkley served as the initial spokespersons for the plant. These individuals detail the amount of employees present at the time of the incident as well as the number of employees who were taken to hospitals with injuries. Additionally, propylene plant manager Kevin Collins also provides response, arguing that the cause of the blast is undetermined but assuring that equipment will not be restarted until it is proven to be safe. Another early response is given by James J. Mulva, chairman and chief executive officer of Phillips Petroleum Co. aimed to express concern and support for injured workers and families through various statements provided to the media.

Evidence of a poor safety record supported by previous inspections and citations against Phillips Petroleum is provided by OSHA's area director of Houston's south division is provided by Ray Skinner. Additionally, secretary-treasurer Joe Campbell of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy (PACE) union local 4227 publicly argues for the poor safety record and working conditions at the Pasadena plant.

Following the launch of the investigation led by OSHA, Jere Smith and Kristi Desjarlais began serving as spokespersons for Phillips Petroleum. These individuals updated the news media on the condition of the injured employees and argued that Phillips Petroleum would be fully cooperative of the pending investigation. Diana Petterson, John B. Miles, and Administrator Charles N. Jeffress served as spokespersons for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, providing information on the probability of the Pasadena plant being shut down, previous violations of the plant, and

available details on the current investigation. At this point, Glenn Erwin and Jim Lefton joined secretary-treasurer Joe Campbell as spokespersons for PACE. Finally, several law firms in the state of Texas began representing Phillips Petroleum and others began handling cases on behalf of the family of the deceased employee, as well as the employees that were injured in the explosion. Representing Phillips Petroleum was Dan Cogdell and Kenneth Tekell. The only named attorney for the family of the deceased and the injured employees found in news media reports was John Eddie Williams, Jr.

### Pre-Crisis Risk Assessment

Throughout the period between June 1999 and March 2000, Phillips Petroleum had ample time to assess the risk present in the K-Resin unit and take steps toward preventing a crisis of this magnitude. At the Pasadena plant, accidents causing investigation and penalty by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration have been numerous. According to Hanson and Kennett (2000), “[t]he worst of those accidents occurred on June 23, when a blast in the same K-Resin reactor that exploded Monday claimed the lives of a pipe fitter and a maintenance mechanic” (p. A1). Four men were also injured in the June 23, 1999 explosion. As a result of this explosion, “[...] federal officials fined Phillips \$204,000 for 13 alleged safety violations” (Stack, 2000).

Phillips Petroleum’s Pasadena plant history provides evidence to claims of a lapse in engineering, maintenance, and management. According to Staff (2000), “[t]wo workers at the Phillips plant allege that plant managers use maintenance shortcuts that avoid shutting down processes but impair safety” (p. A18). If shortcuts are used, this points to poor judgment on behalf of the management at the plant. Regardless of

maintenance shortcuts, however, the frequency of explosions and other fatal accidents at the chemical plant warrant the claim for a lack of risk assessment within the Phillips Petroleum organization. Following the June 1999 tragedy, Phillips Petroleum crisis managers should have addressed the possibility of future crises of the same magnitude occurring in the K-Resin unit.

### Crisis Communication and Management

The initial response given by the representatives of an organization is considered more important than the final message delivered once a cause for the crisis has been determined. According to Coombs (1999), in crisis response, “[a]ny information void will be filled somehow and by someone” (p. 115). Therefore, organizations must respond as quickly, thoroughly and consistently as possible.

Phillips Petroleum is mostly consistent with the crisis response strategies that they employ throughout the duration of the March 27, 2000 crisis. From the initial response given by Phillips officials several hours after the explosion occurred to the early stages of crisis communication, defined as the statements made before the preliminary findings of the Phillips investigation, Phillips Petroleum uses ingratiation and excuse, as well as corrective action and bolstering. However, following the release of the preliminary results of Phillips investigation, defined as being in the later stages of crisis communication, Phillips Petroleum claims that the crisis was an accident and employs a full-on corrective action and compensation strategy.

### The Initial Response

A crisis triggers the need for information and the initial response made by a spokesperson can determine the way an organization will be received by its stakeholders. According to Coombs (1999), the initial response should be quick, as “[a] quick response helps to ensure that stakeholders receive accurate crisis-related information” (p. 115). Furthermore, the initial response should be thorough, as “[t]he use of silence reflects uncertainty and passivity by the organization. Passiveness is the exact opposite perception an organization should be attempting to create” (Coombs, 1999). Phillips Petroleum’s initial response to the public occurred at approximately 3:53 p.m. (CT) and was delivered by unnamed Phillips officials. The first detailed response was seen in newspapers as being delivered by plant general manager Jim Ross and spokesperson Norm Berkley.

The initial response to the public given by unnamed Phillips officials merely stated that there were injuries from the blast, but that Phillips had no further details concerning the situation (Staff and Wire Reports, 2000a). However, the next set of responses was more detailed than the first, explaining the amount of employees that are employed by Phillips petroleum and giving an approximate number of employees from Phillips and other contracting firms that were taken to hospitals with injuries. According to Stack (2000), plant general manager Jim Ross stated, “[...] 32 employees and 39 contract employees were taken to hospitals with injuries that included burns, smoke inhalation and anxiety-related disorders” (n.p.). Ross added, “[i]t’s a very sad day for us and our facility” (Nichols, 2000a). Additionally, Stack (2000) reported that “Spokesman

Norm Berkley said the plant employs about 850 people, and said about 600 would have been there at the time of the blast” (n.p.).

Also in this response, Berkley provides commentary showing that the efforts of the Pasadena plant have been stunted, as the plant has been taking measures to ensure that a crisis of this type would not occur. Berkley is quoted by Stack (2000), as stating that “[w]e have worked tremendously hard to make sure a situation like that never, ever occurred again. [...] Obviously, it has” (n.p.). The initial responses follow Coombs’ guidelines in that they are quick and informative; however, the first response mostly used silence and only the response made by Ross was sympathetic.

### Early Stages of Crisis Communication

#### Ingratiation and Excuse

On the day following the deadly explosion, spokesperson Kevin Collins released a statement concerning the cause of the blast being unknown. In this statement, excuse is used as Collins attempts to argue that he does not understand why the plant has recently had many serious accidents. According to Rendon, Bryant, Hopper, and Antosh (2000), Collins stated that the cause of the blast was unknown and being looked into, as “[o]ur efforts right now are focused on making the remainder of the plant safe and ensuring that the other employees and other operating units are in safe condition” (p. A1). He continues by saying that all of the plants in the Phillips complex are believed to be safe, but were shut down as a precaution and will not be restarted until it is proven to be safe. Finally, he adds that he has “[...] no idea why the facility has had so many serious

accidents in the past year” (Rendon, et al., 2000). It is through this technique that Collins excuses Phillips Petroleum from any possible blame at the present time.

On the same day, Phillips Petroleum spokesperson Norm Berkley issued a statement, in which he claims:

I don't know what has happened in this case. The only similarity (to the fatal 1989 explosion) is that we had a tragic, tragic day. We've had an explosion. We've had a fire. We've got injured employees. I couldn't feel worse about that. We have worked tremendously hard to make sure that a situation like that never, ever occurred again. Obviously, it has. (Rendon, et al., 2000)

In this statement, excuse is combined with ingratiation in this expression of sorrow for the loss and injury of workers. This statement serves as ingratiation as Berkley reminds the public of the work they have done to try to prevent a crisis like this from occurring again; however, it is also considered an excuse as he argues that these improvements could not stop the present crisis from occurring. In this sense, he also makes the excuse that Phillips Petroleum could not plan for this crisis to occur, as the only thing it has in common with the 1989 explosion was that there was a fire and people have died and are injured. Through this use of ingratiation and excuse, Berkley defends Phillips Petroleum by illustrating their inability to control the occurrence of this tragic event.

#### Corrective Action and Bolstering

As early as the day after the fatal explosion, Phillips Petroleum began employing strategies of corrective action. Officials set up a phone number for anyone with questions about the explosion or seeking information concerning employees to call to obtain this information (Rendon, Bryant, Hopper, & Antosh, 2000). This phone number allows

Phillips Petroleum to be more available to stakeholders, as inquiries concerning specific information regarding the explosion can be handled by one of Phillips' own representatives.

As the Occupational Safety and Health Administration began conducting its own investigation, Phillips Petroleum used their media statements to show that they are fully cooperating with the investigation. According to Nichols (2000a), "James J. Mulva, chairman and chief executive officer of Phillips Petroleum Co. arrived at the site during the afternoon to express concern and promise support for injured workers and their families" (n.p.). Additionally, Norm Berkley said that Phillips will "[...] cooperate...fully, whatever it takes to learn what's happened so we can keep it from happening again. It's a terrible day for us in the plant, a terrible day" (Nichols, 2000a). By showing that Phillips Petroleum is willing to cooperate in a major investigation, Berkley is helping Phillips begin their journey into correcting the problems within their organization. Similarly, Mulva's visit to the site of the explosion promised help for the injured workers and their families, showing Phillips Petroleum's promise to attempt to make up for the damage that the crisis has caused.

In the later stages of the investigation being conducted by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, a Phillips Petroleum supervisor and engineer allegedly entered a control room and may have tampered with a lock box containing data that could have led to answers concerning the cause of the explosion. As the possibility of these allegations reached the media, the Phillips Petroleum safety record was released to the public and Phillips had to conduct its crisis response while, at the same time, defending their organization against these claims. At this point, Phillips Petroleum began coupling

corrective action with bolstering to defend its organization against claims of being at fault for the occurrence of the explosion and the possibility of tampering with important evidence proving these claims.

Corrective action was employed as spokesperson Jere Smith stated that “Phillips is cooperating fully in their investigation” (Rendon, 2000e). However, at this point, Phillips Petroleum decided to use bolstering as a strategy to bring to light their policy that allows employees to file their safety concerns with the plant. According to Rendon (2000e):

Smith, the company spokesman, said Phillips management provides a number of ways to deal with employees’ safety concerns. He said Phillips has an employee safety committee, area safety representatives and an open-door policy with any company official, as well as daily, weekly, and monthly safety meetings. (p. A1)

Additionally, corrective action was used in conjunction with bolstering as a Phillips spokesperson said that Phillips began working with the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy union to place the Pasadena plant in a voluntary protection participation program. This program allows companies to work together to reduce accidents in their plants and exceed OSHA’s standards (Nichols, 2000b). The statement showing the Phillips will be joining this program implies that corrective action is being taken. However, Jere Smith used this opportunity to once again utilize the bolstering strategy, stating that “Phillips takes great pride in its safety record. We thought we were at the point where we could avoid these incidents. We’re still working on it. We’re going to continue. We’d like to have it at zero” (Nichols, 2000b). This statement implies to stakeholders that Phillips has a positive safety record with few incidents occurring.

## Later Stages of Crisis Communication

### Accident

Following the release of the results of a preliminary investigation conducted by Phillips Petroleum, company officials cited a chemical reaction caused by residue at the bottom of the storage tank as the likely cause of the explosion. In this sense, spokespersons for Phillips Petroleum use the accident strategy, citing that the incident was the result of an unintentional mistake in judgment by workers. According to Asher (2000), Jim Ross said:

[w]e thought it was empty. In fact, it had been checked, and all measures showed it was empty. But apparently it had some residue material in the bottom, and over time it reacted and gave off enough heat to overpressure the vessel. Under certain conditions, this chemical will slowly react with itself. When it does, it gives off heat. That then pressures up the vessel. As the vessel pressured up, it failed, it blew apart. That is the most plausible scenario. (p. A37)

Although Ross does not assign blame as to who thought the vessel was empty, this statement implies that Phillips Petroleum is taking responsibility as a whole for an accident. It is further considered an accident as Ross justifies that the storage tank was checked and all measures showed that it was empty.

In more technical jargon, Ross stated:

[t]he most plausible scenario at this point is that a dry butadiene tank – taken off line, believed to be empty and in a purge mode – had sufficient ‘popcorn’ polymer and butadiene in the tank to react. We also believe the popcorn polymer plugged the purge lines so that an effective purge was not taking place. Under those circumstances, it appears that a reaction of residual popcorn polymer and butadiene could provide enough heat to overpressure the vessel, resulting in vessel failure. (AcuSafe, 2000)

In this statement, Ross is also using the accident strategy as he includes the idea that Phillips Petroleum workers believed that this tank was empty and in a purge mode. This statement allows Phillips Petroleum to take responsibility for the tragedy, while reinforcing the idea that the explosion was unintentional and could not be foreseen.

### Corrective Action and Compensation

The final strategy employed by Phillips Petroleum following the release of the preliminary investigation report is corrective action coupled with compensation. General manager Jim Ross argues that the company's investigation is not complete. He states that, "[w]e've actually brought in some outside experts and analytical people. We are not going to stop the investigation until we know absolutely for sure what happened" (Asher, 2000). Furthermore, he says, "[w]e are working closely with the investigating agencies, local officials, union leadership and our employees to fully understand exactly what has happened and take corrective actions" (Asher, 2000). By showing that Phillips Petroleum is cooperating with and contributing to ongoing investigations, Ross is showing that Phillips is committed to taking corrective action for this case.

Additionally, in regard to the alleged criminal trespassing of Phillips Petroleum employees, Ross released a statement saying:

[o]ur investigation did not lead us to that conclusion. To date, we feel that our employees acted responsibly. Shortly after the incident, three people went into a building in the general area. There has been some alleged wrongdoing. When we heard of it, we took immediate action and contacted our own criminal investigators. We cooperated fully with the FBI. I do know that when they left, they seemed to be satisfied that there was no wrongdoing. (n.p.)

In this statement, Ross is attempting to illustrate Phillips Petroleum's cooperation to take corrective action for the possibility of a tampered investigation by showing that Phillips Petroleum contacted criminal investigators and cooperated with investigators concerning allegations against their own employees.

Compensation is largely the most important strategy employed by Phillips Petroleum in response to the explosion. The first instance of this strategy was in a statement made by Jim Ross in which he states that "[o]ur people are improving. We've been working with the families and support them with any needs that they may have" (Asher, 2000). Later, compensation is shown as a means of bringing relatives closer to their injured family members, as well as ensuring available jobs for the injured once they have recovered. According to Rendon (2000d), Phillips spokesperson Mike Catt said:

[w]hile the injured workers are recovering, they continue to receive full pay and benefits [...]. He said the company also is providing counseling for the victims and family members, lodging so that relatives can stay near hospitals, travel expenses and the use of mobile phones and computers. (p. A1)

By providing such services to family members, Phillips Petroleum is providing compensation for the unexpected financial expense that the families of the injured and deceased must incur.

Finally, in January 2002, Phillips Petroleum combined both corrective action and compensation as they agreed to pay more than \$2.1 million in penalties, as well as hire safety and health consultants. According to Antosh (2002), Phillips spokesperson Kristi DesJarlais said, "[t]he current plant owner is committed to safe operations and has initiated several steps to further improve safety there" (n.p.). According to Wright (2002):

Chevron Phillips has agreed to retain the services of both a process safety management training and operating procedures consultant. Each consultant will conduct comprehensive reviews of the training program and standard operating procedures at the K-Resin facility. The company has agreed to implement all feasible recommendations of the consultants by July 31, 2002. (n.p.)

By taking part in safety management training and allowing a consultant to evaluate their operating procedures, Phillips Petroleum shows that they are taking action against the possibility for a similar occurrence in the future.

## CHAPTER V

### EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

The March 23, 2005, explosion at British Petroleum and the March 27, 2000 explosion at Phillips Petroleum have had a remarkable impact on these refineries and the way that they view safety and procedure in each of their plants. Both companies have undergone a great deal of criticism based on the reoccurrence of tragedies at their plants that could have been prevented with proper risk assessment procedures put into place. Furthermore, British Petroleum has specifically been criticized based on their use of the accident strategy, blaming the crisis on refinery employees. Although the compensation strategy enacted in the later stages of crisis communication allowed the organization to slightly rebound, many shareholders, specifically the employees who were fired and the union that represents them, remain angry. Phillips Petroleum, on the other hand, has been criticized based on their use of bolstering and excuse. Reports citing that there were indications of problems in the unit that were not recognized due to improper employee training undermined Phillips' attempt at an effective excuse strategy. Additionally, reports of multiple violations from OSHA also undermined Phillips' attempt at using bolstering to expose a safe workplace record. More specific examples of the criticism British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum endured based on their choice of crisis response strategies will be furthered discussed in this chapter under the headings "Significance of British Petroleum" and "Significance of Phillips Petroleum."

Based on the negative response from stakeholders, one may argue that British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum were unsuccessful in their crisis communication;

however, these particular portions of the strategies they used seem to be the sole roadblock in what appears to be an overall effective contingency plan. Because of this, there are many far-reaching implications embedded in the analysis of the two cases, specifically in regard to a significance of actions and crisis response strategies employed by British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum and a failure to enact pre-crisis risk assessment which has unnecessarily affected post-crisis damage.

### Significance of British Petroleum

British Petroleum is significant in that various changes in policy and procedure were made within the plant, as well as an extremely quick settlement with many of the victims, following the occurrence of the March 23 crisis. One commendable action taken by British Petroleum is the significant amount of changes in policy and procedure that they have taken following the March 23 explosion. It is unfortunate that a crisis of this magnitude had to occur before the safety vulnerability was accounted for, but the changes taken are a part of a larger risk assessment plan for the future. The changes in policy and procedure implemented include: a clarification and reinforcement of roles, responsibilities, and expectations around startup, operating, and evacuation procedures; the prohibition of the occupancy of trailers within 500 feet of stacks and flares; the removal of non-essential personnel; the commissioning of a new facility siting study; the requirement of supervisor presence at units during complex operations; and the detailed documentation of shift changes (Pillari 2005b). Additionally, British Petroleum is currently enforcing more policy and procedure changes, such as: the elimination of venting heavier than air hydrocarbon vapors from blow down drums and stacks;

modification of the design of the 12 units; and a comprehensive examination of all process related atmospheric relief systems (Pillari 2005b).

Another commendable action is that of the quick settlement that British Petroleum is enacting. Attorney Robert Kwok is quoted by Aulds (2005b) as saying, “I think they are doing the right thing [...] [t]his process has moved along at a remarkable pace” (p. 2). Similarly, Aulds quotes Attorney David Perry as saying that BP officials “[...] made a business decision to put this behind them [...] I have hope they have made the commitment to do the right thing in making a number of operational changes at that (refinery) as well” (p. 2). The words of these attorneys echo loudly. If British Petroleum settles quickly, they will be more likely to recover from the damage that the crisis has done to their reputation.

Although the above-mentioned actions are positive, British Petroleum did not escape heavy criticism from stakeholders. A change in image and credibility certainly surrounded the case largely due to their use of the accident strategy. In this strategy, British Petroleum clearly took responsibility for the crisis, but blamed workers on its occurrence. British Petroleum’s Fatal Accident Investigation Report cited a lack of direction by supervisors, specifically that the superintendent was unaware that the raffinate splitter was being restarted and so other workers were unaware of who was in command and, in turn, the possibility of danger nearby. This angered many stakeholders, specifically employees and the union that represents them, as well as those workers who were reprimanded or fired for their “involvement” in the incident.

At the British Petroleum’s annual meeting in London, Shah (2005) reports that “[o]ne shareholder, Brian Nixon, persistently harangued the assembled board on a huge

number of issues, accusing them of ‘feathering your own nests’” (n.p). Furthermore, according to Aulds (2005d), “[t]he union contends the company spent more time blaming workers than facing up to its own missteps” (p. 1). This union, The United Steelworkers, says that management decisions, unsafe design flaws, and process safety procedures are mostly to blame. Aulds cites Gary Beevers, United Steelworkers regional director, as stating:

[i]f the company had taken the union’s advice to pipe the atmospheric vent (a pressure release system known as the blowdown stack) where the hydrocarbons were released to (a) flare system, and if the company had not violated its own policy and issued themselves a variance in order to place the trailer in the middle of a dangerous unit, there would have been no fire and there would have been no deaths. (n.p.)

This response from the union shows a significant severing of the relationship between British Petroleum and its workers. The response does not stop at a verbal challenge, though. Top local and national United Steelworkers have begun their own inquiry into the explosion. British Petroleum fired three of the union’s members following the investigation and reassigned the refinery manager. Aulds (2005e) cites union President Steve Lyle as stating, “[o]ne of the guys told me of a story that his daughter has not gone to school sporting events because people were labeling her dad as a killer [...] (BP) hasn’t just terminated a man. They are trying to ruin his life” (n.p.).

#### Significance of Phillips Petroleum

Efforts made by Phillips Petroleum to show their willingness to cooperate with officials and correct the problems within their organization were hampered by their attempt to avoid joining voluntary programs and enact corrective measures early on. It

was not until the final stages of crisis communication that Phillips agreed to put these measures into place, making it look like a forced agreement rather than a voluntary one. Similarly, Phillips was given citations from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration for 30 instances of failure to properly train operators and supervisors of the hazards involved with butadiene chemicals. Rather than using these citations to drive an implementation of procedures to properly train employees, Phillips shrugged the citations off, faulting OSHA for not attempting to find a resolution. According to Rendon, Sixel, and Moreno (2000), “Phillips Petroleum disagreed with the conclusions, expressing disappointment that OSHA ‘chose to issue citations rather than pursue a mutually satisfactory resolution of the issues’” (p. A1).

Similarly, their effort to use bolstering as a strategy to remind stakeholders of a commendable safety record was hampered by the release of the plant’s OSHA record. From 1990 to the time of the explosion in 2000, Phillips had been cited for 59 violations from 20 incidents and has paid about \$324,000 in fines. Forty-three of these violations were deemed willful, serious or repeat offenses, representing Phillips’ lack of not only a commendable safety record, but also a willingness to take corrective action to prevent future incidents from occurring. This record is “[...] more than twice the violations of other facilities using the same kind of hazardous chemicals, government records show” (Kennett, 2000). Kennett cites Jim Lefton, a representative with the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union as stating, “[t]here is something seriously wrong out there, and you would think, after 1989 that would be the safest plant on the Ship Channel” (p. A1). Furthermore, Rendon (2000e) cited Phillips employee Steve Cadena as being bothered by officials’ comments after the explosion,

saying “[t]hey said they were doing everything they can do to make the plant safer, well I’d have to personally disagree with that because if they were, my friend Alan Goss would be home with his wife and not in the hospital” (p. A1).

Phillips Petroleum also did not escape heavy criticism from stakeholders regarding their use of the accident strategy. A change in image and credibility surrounds this case due to this strategy, as Phillips Petroleum takes full responsibility for the crisis, but manages to implicitly state that the incident was the result of an unintentional mistake in judgment by workers, rather than a fault of the management for not training workers properly. Although it was stated that this accident was unintentional, stakeholders still cling to the notion that Phillips Petroleum spends more time blaming its workers than correcting the problems within the plant. Rendon (2000e) cited Cadena as stating that company officials should “quit pointing fingers at individual employees and saying, ‘It was your fault this happened,’ and finally admit there is something wrong with this system” (p. A1).

A severing of the relationship between Phillips Petroleum and its employees and other stakeholders occurred due to the frequency of tragedies at the plant. According to Hanson and Kennett (2000), Joe Campbell, secretary-treasure of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy union stated, in reference to Phillips Petroleum, “[i]t’s the only plant I know of that has had as many of these things as they’ve had. I can tell you, there’s been just too many damn accidents out there to suit my taste” (p. A1). The frequency of explosions no longer surprises residents of Houston and nearby counties, either. According to Hanson and Kennett (2000), Winnie Moore, a resident of southeastern Fort Bend County, said “I just think it’s a damn dangerous plant. I don’t

know how much more those poor workers out there can take” (p. A1). Similarly, employees are equally desensitized to the frequent occurrence of explosions at the Pasadena refinery plant. Danny George, a Phillips Petroleum chemical worker, is cited by Rendon, Bryant, Hopper, and Antosh (2000), as claiming, “Phillips has got some problems. There’s too many explosions. You’ve got to look at the history. Now, when you hear of an explosion, the first place you look at is Phillips” (p. A1).

The frequency of tragic explosions at Phillips Petroleum is not the only contributor to a broken relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. Mistrust between workers and management is another factor, stemming from the disagreement between the actions that have been taken. Workers claim that management does not listen to its employees concerning safety concerns, however management has argued differently within the statements they released during their crisis response. According to Kennett (2000), “[i]nterviews with union and company officials at the Phillips plant, however, paint the portrait of a workplace rife with mistrust between management and workers” (p. A1). Much of this mistrust exists as many employees state that going public with their safety concerns is a threat to their jobs. Although Phillips officials denied this threat to fire employees, employees claim the threat has been made clear. According to Rendon (2000e), general mechanics Jimmy Easter and Steve Cadena said “[...] that they have tried to work with Phillips management for years to iron out their safety concerns. The company, however, continues using stopgap measures that place workers’ safety at risk [...]” (p. A1).

### Significance of Crisis Response

It is of interest to note that, although there is no existing model on industry-specific crisis communication strategies, the two individual case studies used extremely similar tactics in their crisis response. Both cases are broken into two sets of a combination of strategies. In the early stages of crisis communication for British Petroleum, ingratiation and excuse, apology/regret, and corrective action and bolstering were used. Phillips Petroleum made use of ingratiation and excuse, and corrective action and bolstering, skipping the apology/regret strategy. In the later stages of crisis communication, however, British Petroleum made use of full apology and compensation, action, and corrective action, whereby Phillips Petroleum used accident, and corrective action and compensation, skipping the full apology stage and combining corrective action and compensation. Although the two sets of strategies the refineries used exhibit some slight differences, it is obvious that extremely similar strategies were used in regard to two crisis cases that were extremely parallel in nature. By understanding the strategies that were considered successful and unsuccessful, a parallelism in this regard could be significant. As stated before, no existing model on industry-specific crisis communication exists, but this similarity suggests that there is a possibility that a model of this type can be developed using the responses that were successful to both organizations.

Although no evidence exists to confirm or deny whether British Petroleum merely modeled their crisis communication after that of Phillips Petroleum, it is probable that this may have occurred. Since Phillips' explosion happened in 2000, the British Petroleum explosion five years later may have mimicked the crisis response of Phillips

and altered strategies that they felt were ineffective in Phillips' response. For example, in the early stages of crisis communication, British Petroleum added the apology/regret strategy, while in the later stages of crisis communication British Petroleum added a full apology and combined it with compensation, then began its issuing of corrective action. The possibility of British Petroleum mimicking Phillips' strategy further supplies evidence suggesting that a model can be developed, using the failures and successes of refineries that were faced with a similar crisis in the past.

With the exception of the particular use of the accident strategy, the set of strategies used by British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum in both the early and later stages of crisis communication was effective. Furthermore, for British Petroleum, their use of inclusive language within their ingratiation and excuse strategy, such as referring to employees and management collectively as "we," "family," and "us," allows their spokesperson to portray a close relationship amongst its employees, arguing that employers and employees are going through the loss of someone close to them together. Since the use of inclusive language adds to the effectiveness of the ingratiation and excuse strategies, it should be suggested as a possible addition to the models developed by Coombs, Benoit, and Hearit.

In the early stages of crisis communication, the use of ingratiation and excuse enabled both refineries to remind stakeholders of the positive accomplishments belonging to their company, while arguing that they were not able to prevent or foresee the crisis' occurrence. Corrective action and bolstering showed both refineries' willingness to identify and correct the malfunctions in their individual systems and, once again, remind the stakeholders of how well they managed the crisis. Furthermore, British Petroleum's

added use of apology/regret allowed the expression of grief for the occurrence of the crisis and for those who were injured or killed in the tragedy.

In the later stages of crisis communication, the use of full apology and compensation showed that British Petroleum took full responsibility for the explosion and its effects. It also showed that British Petroleum was willing to work with the injured and the families of the victims to provide monetary relief. By Phillips Petroleum withholding a full apology, however, it showed the public that, although they attempted to take responsibility for the explosion, they do not feel that they were at fault and, therefore, do not need to issue an apology to their employees or stakeholders. Corrective action showed that both organizations had not stopped in their efforts to correct problems in policy that contributed to the explosion. Phillips pairing of corrective action and compensation made their attempt to correct what the crisis had damaged seem forced. Because they did not attempt to enact the corrective action as they promised in the early stages of crisis communication until the accident report placed them at fault for the crisis, it appeared that this was a last resort attempt at crisis response.

Finally, the use of the accident strategy was ineffective for both British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum. However, in many ways, this strategy could have been effective if it had been employed differently. Had the two refineries taken responsibility for their respective explosions as an organization, rather than placing full blame on its employees, their relationship with stakeholders would not have been strained. In regards to this contention, Tara Hart, chief executive of the Compliance Alliance, a Houston, Texas based workplace consulting firm is quoted by Aulds (2005e) as saying “[i]f you only fire

people after an explosion you are not following safety. Accountability, responsibility, begins before the explosion, not after” (p. 4).

### Implications of Pre-Crisis Actions

Not only does the crisis response delivered following a crisis affect an organization; the pre- and post- crisis actions have an equal bearing on an organization’s credibility and their stakeholders’ perception of them. As for British Petroleum’s pre-crisis action, as stated in the analysis, it is commonly known that the turnaround period is a dangerous time for any refinery. Depland (2005) states that “[t]he explosion and fire on March 23<sup>rd</sup> was completely unanticipated” and “[w]e did not anticipate the series of compounding events that we believe led to the incident” (p. 1). Evidence exists, however, that points to the possibility for anticipation not based on the series of events Depland speaks of, but on the sole fact that unit was in the turnaround and had previously exploded a year ago during the same period. Had British Petroleum enacted a proper risk assessment team to evaluate these possibilities, they could have better prepared for the crisis by correcting some of the discrepancies in their policy and procedures, namely the supervision failure, before the unit had ever been restarted.

Phillips Petroleum’s pre-crisis action also has its faults. According to Rendon (2000e), Phillips spokesman Jere Smith said “[...] six safety grievances have been filed over the past two years regarding the K-Resin plant, five of them from one person” (p. A1). However, regardless of who files what amount of complaints, the fact is that complaints were filed and attention should have been given to this matter. Furthermore, two people were killed and four injured in June 1999 in the same K-Resin unit where the

2000 explosion occurred. This fact alone shows that there have been known problems in the unit that must not have been corrected after the first incident occurred. Additionally, the grim record released by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration shows that many citations were given for lack of training workers properly, which is what was determined to be the underlying cause for the explosion, illustrating the opportunity they had from 1990 to 2000 to correct this improper training method. According to White (2000), Joe Campbell, the secretary-treasurer of PACE Local 4227 stated,

Phillips is one of the most penny-pinching SOBs there are. They are always talking about cost savings, just like the rest of corporate America. They've been cited so many times by OSHA, but all they get is a slap on the wrist and they promise to do better next time. (n.p.)

#### Implications of Post-Crisis Actions

Because of the lack of risk assessment in each case, both British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum were faced with a crisis that caused much damage. A post-damage impact assessment shows that British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum suffered financially, with human loss, and with their reputation. Financially, both refineries had to compensate for lost time, unit reparation, medical costs, and settlement costs.

Although, at the time of this research, detailed damage assessments for British Petroleum were not available, one risk analysis source was quoted as saying that they “[...] can't see the settlement being less than \$100M [...]” (Newratings, 2005b). Other, unidentified risk analysis sources state that “[...] damage to the refinery and potential litigation could put the costs of the incident over US \$1 billion [...]” (Carson, 2005). One financial cost away from the lawsuits by injured employees and the families of those

who were killed is that of OSHA. According to Aulds (2005f), on September 23, 2005, “[t]he Occupational Safety and Health Administration on Thursday levied the largest fine in the agency’s history against BP Products North America for the March 23 explosions at the company’s Texas City refinery” (n.p.). This fine totaled \$21 million and citations for 12 willful violations. Additionally, the U.S. Justice Department is reportedly seeking criminal charges against British Petroleum in relation to the explosion. According to Aulds (2005g), a report published in online editions of the Scotsman, a national newspaper in Scotland, quoted unnamed sources as confirming possible criminal and civil charges.

Phillips Petroleum, on the other hand, was fined \$2 million in penalties for safety and health violations. In addition to this financial burden, the organization had to hire safety and health consultants to aid them in their compliance with OSHA’s process safety management standards. Furthermore, they agreed to retain the services of process safety management training and an operating procedures consultant who will provide comprehensive reviews of the procedures taking place at the K-Resin facility.

In addition to financial loss for both refineries are the loss of human life and the acquirement of a negative reputation for the organization. This loss is illustrated by the fact that each explosion killed and severely injured employees. In the British Petroleum case, 15 employees were killed and 170 others were injured, whereas in the Phillips Petroleum case, 1 employee was killed and 74 others were injured. In terms of organizational reputation, the weakened stakeholder relationship in each case evidences the reputational damage that took place following these crises. In the British Petroleum case, obviously stakeholders began questioning BP’s value of financial cost over human

life. Tony Alves of KBC Peel Hunt is quoted by Newratings (2005b) as stating “[...] the incident was ‘hugely embarrassing’ for BP, and the impact on its reputation is much more severe” (p. 1). For Phillips Petroleum, Joe Campbell is quoted by White (2000) arguing, “[t]oo many people have been killed in the complex over the last 10 years. We’ve got people who are scared to go back in that plant because they are worried there is going to be a reoccurrence. Several are going to psychiatrists” (n.p.). Additionally, stakeholders felt their pleas for correcting poor safety measures were being ignored. According to Rendon (2000e), employee Steve Cadena stated,

I believe management in K-Resin is not listening to the employees. That’s the key. They don’t believe us. In the last nine years, they say Jimmy and I bring too much up there and that we’re constantly throwing safety grenades and shooting arrows in the air. But (the warnings) have come true. (p. A1)

Similarly, the Phillips Petroleum site manager continuously rescheduled and postponed meetings with the union to a point where they never occurred. According to Kennett (2000), these meetings were set to address the

[...] employees’ loss of faith in plant officials to put safety first; the movement of the safety department from the production units to the front office; changes of convenience in standard operating procedures; and a staffing shortage and reliance on overtime that affected workers’ attitudes and safety. (p. A1)

Ultimately, union officials grew frustrated with Phillips Petroleum managers and pulled their representatives from the meetings.

Therefore, both explosions had a major impact on the stakeholders’ perception of each refinery. Each company was criticized for their use of the accident and bolstering strategies, and lack of attention given to pre-crisis risk assessment and previous safety violations. Losses were incurred financially, as well as in regard to human life and

organization reputation for each refinery, as well. However, the overall set of crisis communication strategies used by the refineries during their response to their respective crises seem to be a viable consideration for a future model in industry-specific crisis response, particularly in the refinery industry in the event of a similar crisis.

### Developing a Preliminary Model

By analyzing the effectiveness of the crisis response techniques used in the case study presented, fundamental resources to propose a possible model are available. This model (Figure 1) would consist of three time periods; labeled as “I,” “A” and “B.” Time period “I” is representative of the initial response the refinery would give following the notification of the occurrence of a crisis. “A” represents the early stages of crisis communication, those occurring before the cause of the crisis is determined. Likewise, “B” represents the later stages of crisis communication, those occurring following the announcement of the cause of the crisis. Using the British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum crises as a basis for proposal, the strategies included under time period “A” would be ingratiation/excuse (embedded with the use of inclusive language), apology/regret, and corrective action/bolstering. The strategies included under time period “B” would be full apology and compensation, and corrective action.

Strategies included under time period “A” reflect the need for the refinery to protect itself from criticism of fault, but remain sensitive to the needs of the audience. Furthermore, as the period moves closer to the release of the report detailing the cause of the crisis, the organization is afforded the opportunity to remind stakeholders of the positive elements of their organization and prepare for the worst by issuing corrective

action. Should the organization be found at fault, the use of apology and corrective action in this set of strategies will lessen the chance for an organization to be heavily criticized. Strategies included under time period “B,” however, reflect a need for the refinery to finalize its crisis response attempts. By issuing a full apology, the organization takes responsibility for the crisis. Compensation and corrective action are also necessary to show the stakeholders that they are willing to correct the damage that has been caused by the crisis.

It should be noted that strategies such as minimization, transcendence, bolstering, and accident are left out of this model. The reason for this lack of inclusion is the idea that each of these strategies serves to make the crisis seem less tragic than it is, to show that something worse could have happened. In the event of a crisis that causes the loss of life, it is against the value of human life to argue that something could be worse or that the current crisis is not as horrible as it seems. Furthermore, the use of bolstering was considered to be an ineffective strategy in the case study presented in this analysis. As evidence showing that the refineries had safety records that were not as positive as their bolstering claimed, stakeholders became less trusting. Similarly, with the use of the accident strategy, British Petroleum used it to accuse employees of causing the crisis which was ineffective once union leaders and stakeholders became angered.

Based on the strategies included in this preliminary model, as well as those not included, it should be argued that, with the combination of proper pre-crisis risk assessment and manipulation of the crisis response strategies that proved to be successful for both refineries, post-crisis damage could be lessened for future refinery cases that are similar to the two presented.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Several assertions have been made throughout this thesis that call for further scholarly examination. In chapter one, the idea that rhetorical criticism and public relations can be merged, as rhetorical studies do not need to focus on building theory is asserted. In other words, in following a rhetorical case study approach to crisis communication, individual cases are examined to generate an understanding of the crisis response released by each organization. This method, using only individual cases, rather than multiple instances of similar cases is still a valid rhetorical study. In this sense, this study is unique in that it takes a rhetorical, public address approach to conducting a case study. Future research should further examine the ability to merge these fields based on the idea that understanding the damage a crisis has caused, and examining the discourse used, is crucial to the goal of crisis communication literature—understanding the success of crisis response methods.

In chapter two, another connection between crisis communication and rhetorical theory is made as apologia's roots in rhetoric are discovered via apologia's derivation from classical Greek language. Similarly, the idea that effective apologia must embody elements implied in the literature of Aristotle—logos, ethos, pathos—is also worthy of further scrutiny. Additionally, in this chapter, the ideas of Hikins on the rhetoric of disaster are introduced. It is unfortunate that the majority of research on crisis communication deals only with the strategies employed, failing to analyze how the discourse used in these strategies influence the overall image of the organization. It should be stated that understanding the discursive effect on crisis response is, really, quite

an important component to understanding crisis communication and, thus, deserves additional attention in future studies.

Future research should also work toward creating a more specific definition of a crisis. In chapter three, definitions of crisis coined in crisis communication literature by Weick, Paschall, and Lerbinger were examined against Coombs' study of definitions by Fink, Fearn-Banks, and Barton. Collectively, themes that emerged in both explications argue for a working definition that considers a crisis as being an improbable threat with the potential to severely damage various aspects of an organization (such as: reputation, profitability, and stakeholder relations) unless a rapid, well-formed response is delivered to the affected audience.

Chapter three also explores the question of "what constitutes a crisis?" and examines possible answers in terms of exigence. It is argued that, in a crisis such as the explosions at British and Phillips Petroleum, the act is representative of Bitzer's claim that a situation calls for a rhetorical response, rather than Vatz' argument for rhetor-based rhetoric. Since a crisis that harms employees or citizens will alert the audience to ethical values on life, this establishes a need for the audience to have questions concerning the crisis answered, supporting the idea of a situation calling for rhetoric. It is discussed in this section that crisis communication has the potential to add to the subjectivist/objectivist debate in the field. Reality has the ability to impinge on our discourse in such a way that, although rhetoric has the ability to ease the concerns of the audience and lessen the perceived severity of an event, the crisis itself cannot be dismissed. Therefore, future research should serve to use crisis communication to add to this debate.

Also in chapter three, the notion that the goals of Neo-Aristotelian criticism and crisis communication research are the same, as well as the techniques used to critique and analyze the discourse produced is put forth. Further research on the more in-depth similarities between Neo-Aristotelian analysis methods and crisis communication research methods should be considered, as both forms of analysis assume that we can evaluate a few cases and use the results of the evaluation to understand a larger rhetorical event.

Finally, the analysis of the crisis communication strategies employed by British Petroleum and Phillips Petroleum resulted in several interesting avenues for future research to examine. First, as no existing model on industry-specific crisis communication exists, the fact that both refineries employed such similar techniques throughout all stages of crisis communication supports the possibility that this type of model could be developed. Although it is unknown whether British Petroleum mimicked the efforts made by Phillips Petroleum's crisis response teams five years prior, this possibility further evidences the idea that a model can be developed using the failures and successes of crisis response efforts in the past to mold it.

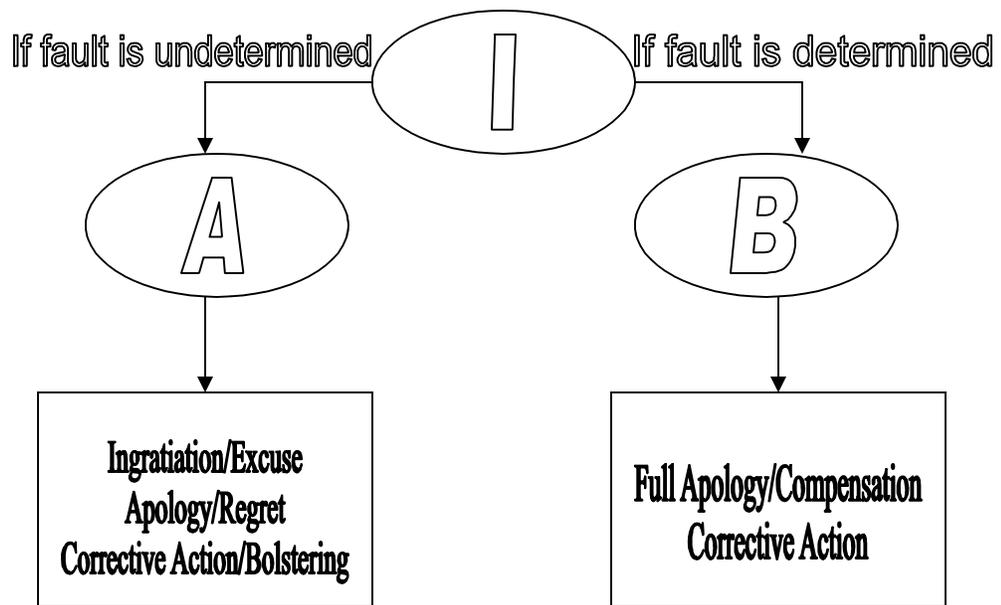
Furthermore, if the attempt to create an industry-specific model fails, the results of this study also propose the idea that an applied rhetorical analysis that could be genre-specific exists. For example, perhaps a new genre for industry accidents may be created, considering the similarities that exist between both crisis response efforts. So, the genre of industry accidents may join the pre-existing rhetorical genres such as the eulogy and the parody as its own genre.

The use of inclusive language embedded in British Petroleum's crisis response seems to have been an effective strategy. Their crisis response strategies were supplemented with their referring to employees and management collectively as "we," "family," "our," and "us," simulating an emotional closeness between the audience and the spokesperson. This rhetorical function suggests a possible addition to the models developed by Coombs, Benoit, and Hearit, as well as the possibility for becoming part of the preliminary model. Although inclusive language would not be considered a main strategy, such as ingratiation or corrective action, it should be considered a viable component to such strategies. Using inclusive language during the ingratiation/excuse strategy, for example, may contribute to the overall success of that strategy. Thus, the idea of inclusive language as a supplement to existing strategies warrants further examination.

Additionally, as seen in the British Petroleum case, unions play a unique role in an organization's crisis response. The union can be examined in several angles: as a stakeholder, as a protector of employee rights, and as a whistleblower to discrepancy. In this sense, the union may have its own agenda in their claims against an organization which may cause a researchers' perception of stakeholder response to a crisis to be incorrect. For that reason, further research in crisis communication should explore the roles a union plays in facilitating or hindering crisis response efforts, as well as the overall success of crisis response efforts made by an organization.

In conclusion, this study takes an important step in the direction of enriching our understanding of crisis communication. By proposing a merge between the fields of public relations and rhetorical criticism, in the search for better understanding the

effectiveness of crisis communication, an interesting movement is taking place. Through evaluating and understanding the extensive connections between the roots of each field and their respective methods for analysis, this proposal is supported. Of special importance to note is that, as past literature has evidenced, the merging of two related fields can only strengthen the scholarship of both.



I: Represents the organization's initial response upon learning of the occurrence of a crisis

A: Represents the steps an organization should take if they are unsure of who is at fault for the crisis

B: Represents the steps an organization should take if they are at fault for the crisis

Figure 1 Preliminary industry-specific (refinery) model for crisis response

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