

Apology as Crisis Communication Strategy-Importance of Cultural Context

Želimir Kešetović¹, Ivan Toth² and Nedžad Korajlić³

¹ Faculty of Security Studies, Belgrade, R. Serbia

² University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica, Velika Gorica, Croatia

³ University of Sarajevo, Faculty for Criminal Justice, Criminology and Security Studies, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

ABSTRACT

One of the frequently used strategies in crisis management, i.e. crisis communication used by organizations affected by crisis is public apology for the crisis. Usually it is lightly considered as a strategy which automatically gives results and reduces the effects of crisis, which is far from true. The effectiveness of public apology depends on an entire series of factors such as the nature of crisis, place, time and manner in which the public apology is given and the addressed target public. Wrongly given apology may cause serious counter-effects. Particularly great significance lies on the cultural factors. No function of communication includes more tragic intercultural misunderstandings with more negative consequences than an apology given in a wrong way. Using a form of apology which is not in accordance with the cultural patterns of those to whom it has been addressed, the apology may jeopardize reconciliation, strengthen the resentment, prolong hostilities and additionally complicate resolving of the crisis.

Key words: *crisis, crisis communication, apology, cultural context*

Crisis Situations in Cultural Context

Having stepped out of nature into the culture as human's own second nature, in their evolutionary development the humans have separated from the animal world and started to build a human, social world based on a number of values and norms. Invisible like air, culture is a component of our everyday lives. Since it is ubiquitous, the culture is rarely noticed, just as the last thing a fish in an aquarium would notice is – water, as the famous US cultural anthropologist Ralph Linton said¹. At a general level the culture of a global society defines the place of the human in the world, the relations of individuals and social groups and the basic values and the respective numerous inter-human relations. At a somewhat lower level of observation these relations are concretized through subcultures of individual social groups. If the existential human values are universal (life, justice, truth, love, faith, etc.) their culturally conditioned operationalizations may be very different from society to society, i.e. from one culture to another.

Culture is prescriptive because it consists of a series of instructions on how to behave in certain situations. It also defines the behaviour in crisis situations, as situa-

tions in which the basic values are threatened and the very survival brought into question, so that what is normal and acceptable in one society, can be completely out of place or at least unusual in another society and culture. Since we become aware of our own culture only in contact with another and different culture, it is interesting to remind of the behaviour of the Japanese during the disaster caused by the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. »The Japanese, although in a very difficult situation, at low temperatures, queue calmly for food, water and clothes. If this was compared to any other disaster in any other city in the world, a sense for humanity would be completely lost in such a situation, but not in Japan. The Japanese, in addition to all the accidents that befell them after the earthquake, tsunami and explosions at nuclear power plants, do not leave an impression that they are falling into despair. Their motto is »calm and together«. The Japanese tradition does not allow the people to lose their faces, regardless of the circumstances. When the supplies became available owing to different organizations, the Japanese very politely and calmly waited their turn without pushing or quarrelling. The

supermarkets drastically reduced the prices of products, while the owners of the beverage machines opened the doors of their refrigerators for all the volunteers and those who work in such crises. The only news that did not arrive from Japan were those about theft. It seems that the question why there is no theft in Japan is a rhetorical one. People coming from Japan, namely, show humility, dignity, at the same time showing the need to prove the honour of their family by doing their job properly. In that world it seems that honour dictates behaviour. It is a value both for the younger as well as for the older ones, to be realized through education and for business implications as well. Although the belief is true that every crop has chaff, the statistics show that crime in Japan is very rare. If somebody stole something, they would not only damage their reputation but also the reputation of the entire family. When we compare this situation with the consequences of the earthquake in Chile or with the situation after natural disasters in any other country, we would notice that in the rest of the world the number of criminal activities increases at unprecedented speed. For the sake of comparison, in the photos after the earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010 or after the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001 on the USA, the world saw pictures of distraught people. The faces of the people from Haiti and America clearly showed despair, fear, panic, disbelief and tears. After the devastating earthquake on Haiti, there was anarchy, bands were wandering through the streets, robbing and killing. Similar thing happened after the disaster in New Orleans which was hit by the hurricane Katrina in 2005.

A few pool together even when the disaster is just beginning. Also, those familiar with the Japanese mentality point out that the Japanese are very private when it comes to expressing personal emotions and that they do not want to burden other people with their feelings. This explains also the fact why many smile when giving statements about how they had lost everything. For many Europeans this is beyond understanding. However, the Japanese tradition dictates that an individual shall not transfer their own bad feelings to other people².

These behaviours are confusing and completely incomprehensible for the people from the European cultural circle. A foreign citizen, an English teacher in the city of Sendai, the worst hit by tsunami, wrote a letter about her experiences and published it on the Facebook. The teacher, whose identity is not known, and who signed it as En, points out in the letter that she was fascinated by the Japanese and their unbelievable solidarity. – The situation in Sendai is surreal. The earthquakes occur every fifteen minutes. The sirens constantly alarm people, and helicopters fly over us all the time. Still, in such a situation the Japanese only confirmed that they are special. All, but literally all, help each other. I had never seen such solidarity. Those whose house was demolished were admitted to the home of their neighbours or complete strangers – wrote En³. Such cultural differences are often insurmountable and lead to the separation of people at individual level.

In the text »Japanese remains in Japan« the Spiegel online talks about a German woman who escaped from Japan with her child while her husband, a Japanese, did not even want to hear about leaving the country. Ines Karschloldgen escaped with her three-year old son from Tokyo, while her husband, a Japanese, did not want to leave the country, just like most of his countrymen. Since in Germany, Ines has lost contact with her husband – and regrets coming here⁴.

The importance of cultural factors in crisis situations is proven by the fact that the Manual INSARAG (International Search and Rescue Advisory Group GUIDELINES AND METHODOLOGY) contains a special chapter dealing with Sensitive Issues to Consider which states that one should take into account the value that the local community associates with life, and have in mind the cultural awareness including religion, race and nationality, communication carriers due to language differences, differences in business ethics and the values, customs regarding clothes, food, and behaviour, usage of different medicines and medical procedures, consumption of alcohol, narcotics and cigarettes, driving habits, using tracking dogs, procedures with the diseased and dead, limitations regarding gender, taking photos of the victims or showing their photos, handling sensitive information, collecting remnants of the disaster as souvenirs, access to military religious and similar facilities, etc.⁵. Teaching the members of emergency teams about these topics is obligatory before sending them to a mission in a country. The topic of awareness about cultural differences is included in the NATO programme Course for the International Rescue Operations⁶.

Culture and Crisis Communication

Crisis communication is a significant part of the total crisis management. Apart from operative efforts on resolving the crisis itself in the physical world the management of the perception of the event itself is particularly important (meaning making) in target groups (public) by means of crisis communication. The fact has to be kept in mind that the meaning is not just given but it is constituted in the very communication between the sender of the information and its receiver. It is also important what is being said (emitted) and the method in which this is done as well as the characteristics of the public addressed by the messages. In this sense it is particularly important to have the awareness and the knowledge about the cultural differences, since otherwise crisis communication that was intended to be part of the solution, may become part of the problem. Unskilfully led crisis communication which does not consider cultural differences and the significance of the symbols and rituals may seriously complicate the crisis itself. And, vice versa, the knowledge and recognition of cultural differences may significantly contribute to the effectiveness of crisis communication, and accelerate the resolving of crisis⁷.

The meaning in communication is not simply given but rather always created in interaction between the

communicator and the public, i.e. the sender and the receiver of the information in a certain communication situation. The thing the sender of the message intends to achieve in the communication process, what they formulate as a message and the thing that the receiver decodes can be of completely different and even opposing meanings. This is, certainly, valid for communication in the crisis conditions, with consequences of such misunderstandings in that case being much more serious. The communication misunderstanding can cause crisis, and it may also intensify the crisis and prolong its duration. Therefore, the preparation and realization of crisis communication have to take into account an entire series of issues, and first of all: who speaks and to whom (what target group), how the message is coded, i.e. formulated, and finally, what is the communication situation itself in which the communication process is performed, being aware of the cultural differences.

It is precisely due to the multiculturalism of the public to whom the messages are addressed in crisis that the earlier mainly generally accepted thesis on the existence of one single spokesperson during the crisis is being questioned today⁸. Analyzing the ethnic origin of the spokespeople and the addressed group, Laura Arpan found that »the spokesperson of different ethnic background than the one of the audience, may be well received, but before appointing the spokesperson one should take into account the effect of ethnic identity with the audience«⁹. Therefore, the postmodern attitude starts with the thesis about multi-vocal dissemination of crisis information. In this sense Lisa Tyler criticized sharply the current practices in crisis communication to be honest and tell the truth, claiming that these commands in fact do not recognize nor respect the role of the communicator nor the role of the audience in constituting the meaning¹⁰. Using the postmodern perspective, she negates the need to have a written script and headquarters as part of crisis planning, emphasising that the most important issues are »which stakeholders will probably be most affected and how their suffering can be alleviated. This would not only be a more humane and ethical response than focusing only on the re-establishment of control, but it also has the potential of reducing the legal liability, and may significantly reduce negative publicity«¹⁰.

The scientists who studied intercultural communication have noted the diversity of individual audience and have identified a number of factors which affect on a micro and macro plan the way in which culturally different groups send and receive messages and due to which the understanding of the crisis message can be changed. There are many, but for the sake of analyzing the influence of culture on communication the classification developed by Larry Saraugh can be useful, and it places the emphasis on:

- code systems,
- perception of relations and intentions,
- knowing and accepting normative beliefs and values, and
- worldview¹¹.

At this point we consider only the worldviews, i.e. different ways in which people perceive the world and act in it, and which can complicate the intercultural communication. The perceptions about the nature and the meaning of life, relations towards people and the universe contribute to individual worldview. The cultures which are characterized by fatalism regard crisis situations as being beyond the control of people, whereas other groups believe that they themselves are masters of their destiny¹². The religious i.e. spiritual aspects of culture that affect the understanding of the messages represent also an important dimension, and neither the system of values and their hierarchy is to be neglected, within which the following are of special significance: method of self-identification, role of family, social expectations, elements of human nature, people's attitude towards nature and the role of supernatural¹³.

An illustrative example of a communication misunderstanding caused by the code system in one of the biggest crises in history, World War II, is mentioned by Caughlin. He claims, namely, »that during negotiations about the capitulation of Japan, the Japanese word »mokusatsu« was not translated correctly to the allied commanders; it was translated as »ignore« instead of its correct meaning »to refrain from comment«. Therefore, the allied commanders and politicians understood that the Japanese »ignored« their proposals, which immediately thereafter led to the use of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the USSR entering the war with Japan, and to all the subsequent consequences of these events«¹⁴.

Apology as Crisis Communication Strategy

The tendency to justify the behaviour of the individuals or a group i.e. organization has its roots in the earliest days of humankind. It seems that in today's world of socially constructed reality in which the image of an individual and organization is more important than their identity, and the reputation is the main capital of perceptual enterprises and companies¹⁵, preservation of the good name is more significant than ever before in history. Crises are potentially especially dangerous for the reputation of an organization and they try to preserve and protect it by using various tools, methods and techniques of crisis communication.

Already a superficial glance at the news in the mass media shows numerous and different apologies whether speaking about the president apologizing to the nation, a company that made a product that caused serious damage to the customers or a star in show business who is trying to fix a distorted image. Recently the Pope apologized to women, Jews and non-Catholics, the USA apologized to Japan for atomic bombing, Japan apologized to Korea for sexual abuse of the Korean women during the World War II, and President Clinton apologized to the African Americans for slavery.

It should be mentioned here that the crisis communication aims to make a clear distinction between the de-

fence, i.e. justification (apologia) and apology which usually means also acceptance of blame for the event. However, there is often confusion, and skilful speakers sometimes provide apologia which sounds like apology.

Apology is in fact an expression of regret, sympathy or fault. There is usually a certain degree, sometimes small and sometimes large, of sorrow, guilt or shame. »The degree is rather important here because it significantly affects how we apologize«¹⁶. In addition to individual or interpersonal situations, the requests for apology may be made by one social group to another. Thus, the African Americans made a request to the United States for an apology for slavery; the Pope apologized in March 2000 for the committed sins that refer to the complicity of the Roman Catholic Church in Holocaust, while the Australian government was sent a request to establish the Day of Remembrance of the crimes against the Aborigines¹⁷.

Although at first glance it seems that an apology is by nature of things an efficient strategy, the warning made by Peter Sandman should be borne in mind that the effectiveness of apology depends on the nature of the crisis itself. During the hot phase of the crisis, when people are upset and directly concerned about their safety, health or property, an apology is of secondary importance, even when there is reason for it. In such moments communication needs to be oriented to calming people down, reducing panic, and giving advice and assistance by providing instructions and advice on how to behave and how to deal with the situation. In fact, experts for crisis communication sometimes define the end of the crisis as the moment when the attention of people shifts from the question »how to cope with a difficult situation« to the question »who is to blame for this«. An apology during crisis need not necessarily be a bad idea, but apologizing will have to be repeated when the acute phase of crisis is over¹⁸.

An apology is a particularly important tool in the so-called reputational crises, i.e. in situations in which there is more danger for the reputation of a company or a government agency than for the public. When apologizing and seeking forgiveness the following rules need to be borne in mind:

- You have to recognize what has been done. Hypothetical apologies (»I am sorry for everything I have done, and what may have hurt somebody«) are not enough. The list of failures has to be complete, and apologizing for minor mistakes while masking the major ones is a very bad tactics.
- Others should also be given the opportunity to criticize the made mistakes, avoiding the preventive apologies (»I am sorry, let us not speak about it now, I already said that I was sorry«). Forgiveness requires a period during which the one who is to blame has to repeat that they are sorry, and the victim must be able to say »you should be sorry«.
- An apology is not enough but the responsibility has to be accepted as well, avoiding the childish excuses (instead of the formulation »I am sorry that your lamp broke«, one should say »I am sorry that I

broke your lamp«). Even if the organization decides not to accept the legal responsibility, it still can accept moral responsibility.

- The public has the right to know what actually happened. The explanation is part of accepting the responsibility, and in no way a substitute for accepting responsibility.
- An apology should be supported by the efforts to improve things (by compensation to those who suffered damage and by changing or improving the policy, enhancing the regulations and procedures in order to reduce the probability of repetition of a similar crisis. Naturally, neither this compensation nor the improvement of functioning can ever be a substitute for apology. They come after the apology, and in no way instead of it.
- Finally, the subservience and shame need to be shown as secondary equivalent to repentance. This is the final step to forgiveness. The dynamics of apology/forgiveness is based on shame and repentance. If this is not an integral part of apology then it is not sincere, but rather calculated and does not produce effect¹⁸.

Apart from the mentioned, the effect of apology depends also on whether the crisis was caused intentionally, through conscious action of the subject who wanted the consequences to occur, or the crisis occurred accidentally, i.e. by mistake, ignorance or negligence.

Apology in the Cultural Context

Apology is a universal social function and it is known to all the societies and cultures. However, the forms of apology are by no means universal. Apology is defined by culture, so that from one society to another to a lesser or greater extent the ways of apologizing are different (words, grammar, and gestures, as well as context). The apologies vary from one culture to another and from one language to another. In addition, the non-verbal communication which accompanies the words is equally important. Thus, for instance in Japan bowing deeply is practically an obligatory accompanying manifestation that goes with the apology¹⁹.

It is precisely for this reason that the usage of apology forms inappropriate in the cultural sense may endanger reconciliation, intensify revengefulness, and prolong hostilities. None of the functions of communication includes more tragic intercultural misunderstandings with negative consequences for modern global stability as is the case with misunderstood apology. According to Sidebotham this is often forgotten by the Americans and they often apologize with the wrong forms in international diplomacy and operations of stabilization²⁰.

The anthropologist Gary Chapman and the psychologist Jennifer Thomas mention five forms of apology which they call »languages of apology«:

1. Expressing regret – saying, »I am sorry«;

2. Accepting responsibility – confessing,
»I made a mistake«;
3. Making restitution – promising,
»I will repair / fix this«;
4. Genuine repenting – promising,
»I will not do this again«;
5. Requesting forgiveness – asking,
»Will you forgive me?«²¹

While almost negligible in the Western culture, the importance of apology in many Asian cultures is great, and the semantic area that covers several terms is expanding, unlike the much narrower range of the vocabulary in English that expresses the feelings related to apology. Hofstede explains this by comparing the individualistic and egalitarian western context with the more collectivistic and hierarchical context of the Asian societies based on the differences²².

After the collision of the Chinese fighter jet F8 and the US EP-3 surveillance plane on 31 March 2001, some twenty kilometres off the Chinese coast, the Chinese side requested an apology from the USA before returning the damaged US aircraft and 24 crew members. More precisely, they requested »daoqian«, which is an apology that according to the Modern Chinese Dictionary means expressing the feeling of being sorry, referring to accepting the blame, i.e. apology with admission of wrongdoing (Modern Chinese Dictionary, 1985). In Chinese there are as many as six basic terms for apologizing, with only the first three being used in formal government communication. Apart from the already explained daoqian, also used are baoqian meaning »I am sorry« as sincere but less formal apology accompanied by acceptance of responsibility, yihan which also expresses regret, but without acceptance of blame and is used both formally and informally; nanguo – I feel grieved, used only between persons when expressing sorrow and sympathy without responsibility; duibuqi – excuse me, used colloquially and only informally, and buhaoyisi – embarrassed, used even more casually and informally¹⁷.

The US side refused this at first, claiming that the US plane was flying in the international space, and, therefore, the Americans did nothing that they should apologize for. However, bearing in mind the seriousness of the incident and the significance of the American-Chinese relations this gave rise to live diplomatic activity.

The negotiations between China and the USA took 10 days and got complicated at two levels:

- finding the right words, and
- managing the interpretation of these words in the context of wider American-Chinese relations.

Along with the public demonstration of their hard attitude, the Americans continued their diplomatic efforts. The Secretary of Defence, Powell, sent a letter to the Vice Premier Qian Qicheng using the word »regret«. »We very much regret the pain this accident has caused. President Bush is very concerned about your missing pilot. His thoughts and prayers are with the pilot's family mem-

bers«. The next day the President also expressed his regret. However, from the Chinese viewpoint both Powell and Bush used the wrong word, i.e. »regret« which was translated as yihan). For the majority of the Chinese this is a typical diplomatic word devoid of sincerity and a term which does not include any acceptance of guilt and remorse, and for Qicheng the American statement was unacceptable. The positions of the two sides seemed to be irreconcilable with potentially very grave consequences for the relations not only between the two countries but globally as well. Neither side could easily step down from its position for internal political reasons. After linguistic clarifications by President Jiang, being actually a signal that the Chinese are »lowering the bar« and giving the Americans an opportunity to restate their apology, the solution was found in using the words »we are sorry«. The Chinese assessed that as insufficient, but still a step in the right direction so that after several rounds of negotiations about the usage of the right word, the fifth version of the letter written by the US Ambassador to the Chinese Foreign Minister was accepted by the Chinese. The letter says that Secretary Powell and President Bush express »sincere regret over your missing pilot and aircraft« and to »the Chinese people and the family of pilot Wang Wei that we are very sorry for their loss.« It was only that the term »very sorry« translated as »shenbiao qianyi« satisfied the Chinese side¹⁷.

An interesting example is the one of the US President, Bill Clinton in the case of bombing the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, as told by James Henslin. The Americans in fact apologize often, easily and simply. »I am sorry« or »Excuse me« are words often used in everyday speech. This is not the case with the Japanese and the Chinese, where apology means in a certain sense losing face. This is a serious matter which affects their sense of identity and understanding of relationships. Neither are apologies easily accepted. In China and Japan apology means the exactly spoken words, spoken in an appropriate tone of voice, even wearing adequate clothes. When during an air campaign the Americans bombed by mistake the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, mistaking it for a military target, President Clinton apologized on television. The Chinese officials were infuriated by Clinton and their media refused to broadcast Clinton's apology, since it was given in the yard, and the President was wearing a polo shirt²³. Thus the problem did not lie in the fact who is speaking (the president), nor so much in what was said (the very verbal formulation of the apology) but rather in the non-verbal communication accompanying the apology, i.e. the extra-linguistic non-verbal symbols (first of all the selection of the place of communication and then the sportswear) which are completely differently defined in American and Chinese cultures. Here lies the key to communicational cultural misunderstanding and ineffectiveness of the message. Not only did it fail to achieve its goal – calming of the crisis, but it rather additionally angered the Chinese officials and increased the tension in the relations between the two countries.

The Japanese response to crisis has been designed by a specific structure and relations in the Japanese companies in which crisis communication is the responsibility of managers at middle positions to which they arrived in the middle of career from another sector, which is the practice so that they would acquire an overview of the entire company. Without proper professional training they are reluctant to take over the risks and they do not foresee all the consequences of a crisis for the company in the long run. Sometimes it is only the external PR professional who can tell directly the top management what is in the best interest of the company, but they are rarely engaged. All this stipulates that first information about the onset of crisis first circle on a horizontal level and only after a series of meetings they reach the managerial top which results in slow response, i.e. reaction even in crises that require immediate response. The problem is further complicated by a specific relation of the Japanese managers towards the media. When Japanese managers face a crisis, namely, they have an impulse to avoid publicity and to deal with it in private, which is seen by the media as evasive behaviour, resulting in additional pressure and deeper exploration of the case.

Japan is sometimes referred to as a culture of »high context« that values formal structures and whose members share the same upbringing, experiences and expectations so that many things can be left untold or only indicated with a few words, whereas, on the other hand, American culture is a culture of »lower context« which values openness and relaxation. Therefore, Japanese communication techniques can be effective in the Japanese high context, whereas such method of communication in a different cultural setting can lead to misunderstanding. Apologizing, namely, which plays the key role as crisis response in Japanese companies, is often misinterpreted by those who are not Japanese. Unlike western societies in which public apology is generally understood also as an admission of blame, apologizing in Japan is considered obligatory so that Japanese can often be seen in dark suits at press conferences bowing deeply with painful expressions on their faces, apologizing to the Japanese public where this does not imply either guilt nor innocence.

So, due to an incident with car tyres in 1990 the general manager of the Japanese company Bridgestone/Firestone, Masatoshi Ono apologized during a public hearing before the Congress, which was understood as admission of guilt. Having learned from this, the President of Toyota, Akio Toyoda expressed his regret because of the incident of Toyota's vehicles with the braking system, to the American press whereas in the Chinese press, bearing in mind the similarity of the Chinese and Japanese culture when referring to apologies, he apologized so many times that he started to be called »Mr. Apology«²⁴.

When the Arabs or Pashtun people (ethnic Afghans) hear an apology from the Americans in a form that is common for the American culture, they often question

their sincerity with the main cause of these misunderstandings being precisely the social, i.e. cultural context.

The American culture, more than any other culture in history, takes over significant control of its environment. The individuals control their careers and marriage, and the US government holds under control a large part of the world. People with high sense of power also have a high sense of responsibility and therefore doubt the apologies which do not accept the responsibility for the event. They usually respect people who admit their wrongdoings and do not respect those who find excuses or blame other people or circumstances, and they particularly despise the word »but« in any sentence which contains the words »I apologize« or »I am sorry«. The Americans are quick in apologizing to the world for everything, from collateral damage in air strikes and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib to the slave trade in the past, resulting from the sense of responsibility and control. Admission of »sin« and acceptance of responsibility satisfies the American emotional needs, but it does not lead to reconciliation with the offended and/or damaged Arab population that does not seek recognition of guilt and acceptance of responsibility, but rather seeks restitution/compensation and recognition of dignity which derives from the fact that they are being begged for forgiveness. Neither compensation nor seeking forgiveness require acceptance of responsibility.

On the other hand, most of the peoples of the world have little power and minimal control over their environment and are therefore much more vulnerable to nature and disasters than the Americans. The Arabs, for instance, have little personal control over their careers, marriage and destiny, and the governments of the Near-eastern countries have little global influence and therefore see themselves as victims of unjust world order. The frequent use of the phrase »God willing« (»insyallah«) illustrates precisely the understanding that the final responsibility lies with God rather than with people. People with little sense of power and control have also a low sense of responsibility, and therefore taking over the responsibility is not an obligatory part of their apologies, whereas blaming others is practically part of apologies. People from these cultures appreciate more the dignity than the responsibility.

The forms which include apologizing are significantly affected also by religious heritage. In the Christian tradition God forgives the sins when the believers admit and accept the responsibility for them, whereas only God can forgive a sin, which is theologically marked as »substitutionary atonement« where Christ sacrifices his life for the salvation of humankind. As result in personal and corporate relations, restitution comes more frequently from a third party (government or insurance companies) than from those who are really responsible. Relations are often updated without any restitution. The American apologies usually contain words »I made a mistake« (confession), »I am sorry« (regret) or »I will try not to repeat this« (repentance). In American culture the main glue of human relations is trust, important ideal in relations is

innocence, and the major destroyer of relationships is guilt. In most of the rest of the world the main glue of human relations is respect, an important ideal is honour, and the major destroyer of relationships is shame. The American apology tends to restore trust by humble acceptance of guilt. The apologies in the majority of other cultures tend to restore respect which includes status and honour, whereas admission of guilt would mean humiliation and loss of honour.

In Muslim tradition God forgives sins of people when they show that they are good Muslims fulfilling their basic religious duties. Confession is not necessary, respect is preserved, and humiliation avoided. God forgives sins based on the fact that good deeds outweigh the bad ones. The equivalent form in personal and corporate relations is restitution and seeking forgiveness. Restitution is like a good deed and keeps the dignity of both parties, never admitting wrongdoing. By seeking forgiveness, the responsibility (and control) for restoration / repair of relations shifts from the side that carries the blame to the side which is asked for forgiveness. At the same time, the situation is blamed on the circumstances or other persons in order to avoid responsibility. This is in principle the model of apology in the countries with Muslim majority. From this perspective the American way of apologizing undermines the dignity of the parties that need to be reconciled, publicly humiliates one party, bringing the other into an unpleasant position and giving relative control to the offender rather than to the offended²⁰.

The mentioned cultural differences and the failure to understand them have sometimes tragic practical implications. In the Iraqi city of Mosul at the beginning of 2009, an Iraqi civilian vehicle hit a US military combat vehicle which was on patrol. The driver of the vehicle and the passenger – a child – were killed on this occasion. The Americans compensated the families of the driver and the child, and after that expressed their regret to these families and the whole community stating that they regret the unfortunate incident. It turned out that the driver of the car, who was on the side of the Iraqi rebels deliberately ran into the military vehicle and caused the collision. However, the anti-government elements used the American admission of responsibility to start an anti-American campaign and a campaign against pro-American Iraqi government. On the day when the commander of the US battalion who participated in the incident was on a trip to meet the local leaders and to make stronger their apology by delivering the compensation, a member of the family of the killed boy took his revenge by hitting the vehicle carrying the commander by a vehi-

cle full of explosives. The commander was killed on the occasion²⁰.

Conclusion

Apologizing is one of the very important social and linguistic functions. Its correct implementation can repair disturbed relationships, prevent conflicts, reduce tensions, contribute to recovery, alleviate negative consequences of crisis and accelerate return of an organization into normal conditions. The ability to understand when and how to apologize in the context of contact of the individuals and the organizations that belong to different cultures, may bring peace, i.e. facilitate reconciliation, reduce the cultural shock and improve the overall quality of living of a society. Vice versa, the insensitivity, ignorance and failure to understand the cultural context in which apology is given and accepted may, contrary to the intentions of all the actors, additionally complicate the crisis, prolong the duration of crisis, and significantly complicate its final solution and return to normal.

Apology is a rather present tool in crisis communication, but it need not always be effective. Apology does not automatically entail forgiveness. Its effectiveness depends on the time and the way in which it is given and on the cultural context in which this communication takes place.

Apologizing is a universal function but its implementation takes place in a certain cultural context that has its forms, functions and meanings. Some cultures prefer the forms of apology which mean acceptance of responsibility and minimizing the dignity, whereas others prefer the form of apology which minimizes responsibility and maximizes the dignity. Apologizing to people from one culture in a form which is not appropriate for them may lead to new misunderstandings and hostilities following the initial cause.

The more the crisis communicator knows about the normative beliefs and values of the audience which is on the receiving end of the crisis message, the greater is the chance that these beliefs and values are reflected in the message and that it is appropriate to the receivers, being thus also more effective. When planning the crisis communication strategy which includes apology and when formulating messages, the crisis communicator must find adequate words for the ears of the stakeholders who belong to different cultures. And not just words (text), but they must also match the non-verbal elements of communication and its overall context.

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I. Toth

*University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica, Zagrebačka cesta 5, 10410 Velika Gorica, Croatia
e-mail: ivan.toth@vvg.hr*

ISPRIKA KAO STRATEGIJA U KRIZNOM KOMUNICIRANJU-ZNAČAJ KULTURNOG KONTEKSTA

SAŽETAK

Jedna od često korištenih strategija u kriznom menadžmentu, odnosno kriznom komuniciranju kojoj pribjegavaju organizacije pogođene krizom jest javna isprika za krizu. Najčešće se olako uzima da je to strategija koja automatski daje rezultate i umanjuje efekte krize, što nikako nije tačno. Učinkovitost javne isprike ovisi o čitavom niz faktora kao što su priroda krize, mjesto, vrijeme i način na koji je javna isprika data i ciljna javnost kojoj je ona upućena. Pogrešno data isprika može imati ozbiljan kontraefekt. Osobito veliki značaj imaju kulturni faktori. Niti jedna funkcija komunikacije ne uključuje više tragičnih međukulturnih nespozuma sa više negativnih posljedica od pogrešno date isprike. Korištenje forme isprike koja nije u skladu sa kulturnim obrascima onih kojima se upućuje, isprika može ugroziti pominjenje, pojačati ogorčenje, produžiti neprijateljstva i dodatno otežati rješavanje krizne situacije.