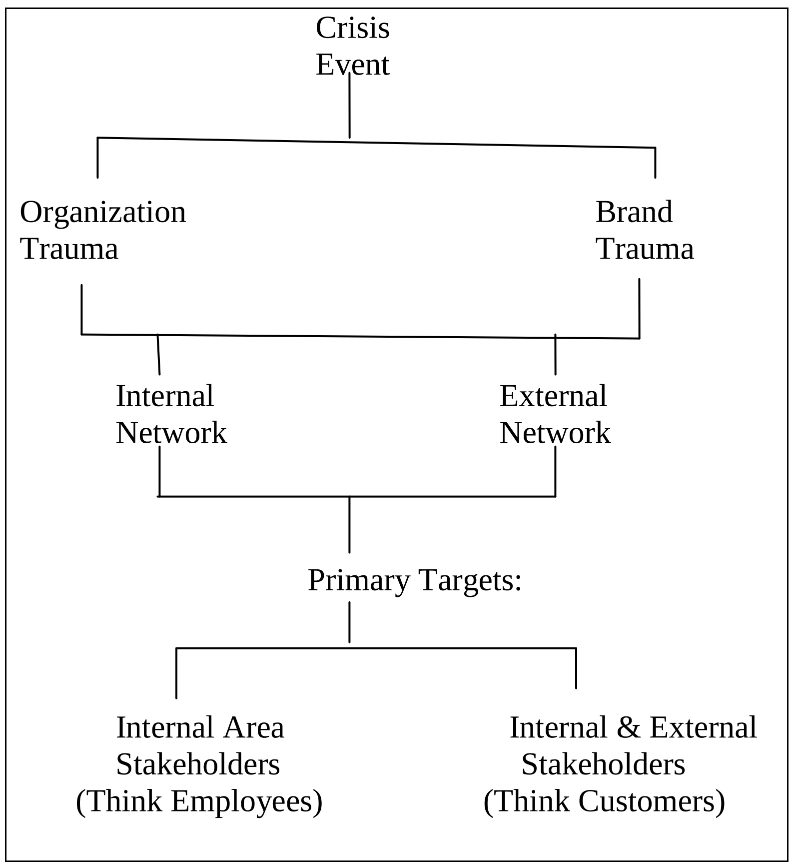
An Introduction to Organizational and Brand Trauma©

CompCite Inc.
(For more information email: admin1@compcite.com)

Society is filled with examples of an organization's broken operations triggering potential brand crises. Rude behavior associated with a routine order-taking transaction in a fast food restaurant or a police officer's overly aggressive or prejudicial behavior associated with a routine traffic stop are now all to familiar examples. Whether we experience them directly or indirectly via television or social media we use this information to evaluate what happened and, in turn, the organization or individual involved.

Mapping the Relationship between Organizational and Brand Trauma



Brand trauma can be so powerful that it may even threaten relationships with organizations that are based on personal, emotional or sentimental bonds.   Politics and religion are among an individual's most private organizational relationships, some often associated with our families and linked to us from our earliest years. But, when the sexual behavior or errant infidelities of our favorite politician or parish priest are revealed our impressions can challenge us to re-evaluate our feelings toward them. In these instances our needs or a sacred trust are violated for them it's their brands that are traumatized.

Some measure of trauma is associated with every crisis. Trauma, to paraphrase the definition of trauma appearing in Wiktionary.org, refers to any serious injury or emotional wound to an organization, often resulting from violence or an accident or event that leads to psychological injury or great distress. (https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/trauma#English) As far as an organization's brand is concerned, when expected events don't unfold in a typical, sometimes mundane but familiar pattern, brand trauma can emerge.

Brand trauma parallels that of the trauma definition presented, but brand trauma is unique because its emergence is more a product of the stakeholders affiliated with the organization and its social network than the crisis or event triggering it. Brand trauma is a communication phenomenon; when brand trauma emerges it communicates something about the brand and about ways people are thinking and talking about the brand. When a crisis occurs the organization's leadership may have to contend with two different traumatic conditions: one affecting the organization and its people and processes and the other affecting the image stakeholders have created. Neglecting either can be catastrophic.

Finally, this is not to suggest that there's either a causal or linear relationship between organizational and brand trauma. A minor or routine event may not contribute to organizational trauma but mismanagement of the same may trigger brand trauma. Just imagine how you feel when you're in a fast food restaurant and the attendant is slow or rude! Your sentiments for that restaurant are channeled directly along your relationship with the organization -- its brand. You may not know who owns McDonald's or who is president of Burger King but you do know you may not shop at the restaurant where you received poor service!

Part II: Doing it Right the First Time

Policies, procedures and practices make a direct contribution to organizations and their networks. Organizations with effective policies, procedures and practices in place maximize their strengths and minimize their weakness and vulnerabilities. More importantly organizations with effective policies, procedures and practices in place can be better able to manage events, crises and trauma if all stakeholders within the organization are integrated into this critical feature.

The Table below summarizes policies, practices and procedures we associate with effective organizations and their networks. All things considered, when the fundamentals described in the Table are in place the organization and its network should reflect the following features. First, Direction is clear and communicated. In most organizations directions does not mean "orders or commands". This is because it's virtually impossible for the "order makers" to be present all of the time in all situations. For example, when you go into your local back to get help from a bank teller there's not someone standing behind the teller telling him or her exactly what to do. But, too, this transaction while seeming straightforward does not just happen. In fact, the bank is successful if its control mechanisms are reflected by five key ingredients: A "vision" the organization has for itself vis a vis other's in the industry or field and a clear definition of its mission or purpose. So a bank doesn't want to be a "good" bank, it wants to be the "best" bank, a trusted bank, a safe place for you to do business, etc.

Key Policies, Procedures and Processes that Contribute to an Effective Organization and Network
Communication Management Objective: Facilitate the exchange of meaning, purpose, and direction. Although we don't one to seem to favor one key policy over another in this instance it is important to point out that even if all other policies fail keeping communication channels and standards open and available is truly critical for an organization regarding of its state or conditions.
Evaluation Management Objective: Unbiased assessment of performance against expectations. It's not just evaluations or assessments that are important; it is knowing that these are done fairly, in terms of communicated and established guidelines and for everyone and everything.
Knowledge Management Objective: Strategies, practices or procedures to acquire, build, develop, and maintain, competencies. This is one of the most sought after policy or procedure, the least understood and the one most often never achieved to its fullest. One illustration: Downsizing when knowledge and experience are lost for often short-term financial gains.
Relationship Management Objective: Strategies, practices or procedures used to acquire, build, develop, and maintain relationships. This is the heart and soul of successful networking and the one least utilized. Think about it. Every organization has a network of stakeholders but what concrete things are typically done to nurture, maintain or develop these networks on an ongoing basis?
Performance Management Objective: Tactical management of direction, control. Performance management is the surest way to ensure that things get done in ways to meet organizations needs and expectations. Yet performance management in most organizations is a passive activity when it should be heavily front-end loaded with performance criteria and expectations and peppered with evaluations and assessments to ensure what's expected occurs.
Directional Management Objective: Establish strategic and tactical perspectives linked to organizational values, culture, and ethics. Directional management is the foundation of an organization's culture. These policies and procedures define the highest levels of order and behavior for stakeholders inside and outside of the organization. Give everyone, friend and foe, supporter and adversary and idea of the organization's standards for performance
Information Management Objective: Development, storage, and retrieval of content. These are tools for ending turf battles, breaking down walls, clearing confusion and, maintaining order when facing chaos. Transparency is the 21th century by-word; it isn't practiced as much as it's preached.

Control mechanisms: policies, practices and procedures make achieving the Vision and Mission possible. Consider a visit you make to your bank. You enter with certain expectations; you have certain needs you want met. So when the teller you're talking too performs in terms of certain "performance objectives" established by the bank the likelihood is that both your needs and the bank's will be met. Perhaps the teller also aims to achieve certain productivity and quality objectives, for example related to customer service. The organization's policies, procedures and practices are the guides which help the teller achieve desired levels of performance in terms of the organization's established expectations, not the teller's. When the teller successfully completes the activities associated with your transaction the performance objectives of the bank, and in turn your own, are realized. The direction and control features incorporated in policies, procedures and practices help the organization achieve the measure of balance or equilibrium it needs to function effectively.

Policies, procedures and practices are what the organization brings to this effort to achieve equilibrium but it's the employee who brings another required feature, "competence" to the interaction. There are lots of ways to think about competencies but for now focus on ways they contribute to an organization's brand and brand management. To be effective competencies must match the activities, jobs, tasks or assignments the organization needs accomplished and second they must be consistently evaluated against expectations.

The potential benefits from having good expectation, policies, practices and processes in place only occurs when there are used and evaluated. It seems an obvious expectation but that doesn't mean this happens in practice. When they aren't in place, used and evaluated potential strengths are at risk and weakness or vulnerabilities can surface.

Finally, the last key ingredient associated with the incorporation of practices, procedures ad processes into an organization's efforts is a sense of urgency regarding one's work or efforts. John Kotter's recent book "A Sense of Urgency" (2008) is perhaps the best recent treatment of the subject. Urgency is more than a rapid fire behavior, people running from place to place making demands of others. Rather, urgent activity is "action which is alert, fast moving, focused eternally on the important issues, relentless, and continuously purging irrelevant activities to provide time for the important and to prevent burnout." (Kotter p. 11)

Here are some references to consider when thinking about what's written above.

Kotter, John P. *A sense of Urgency.* Cambridge: Harvard Business Press, 2008

Tafoya, Dennis. *Organizations in the Face of Crisis: Managing the Brand and Stakeholders.* NY: Palgrave/Macmillan. 2013

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deniseleeyohn.com

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