ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Analysing the dynamics of crisis leadership in higher education: A study of racial incidents at the University of Missouri

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The following article analyses the crisis involving racial tensions at the University of Missouri in 2015 that ultimately contributed to the departure of the university president and chancellor. This case amplifies the importance of organizational vulnerabilities from both an historical context and a national-issue context. As supported through this analysis, crises that reflect these vulnerabilities of an organization can lead to increased scrutiny and may produce greater negative consequences. Drawing upon both the public messaging surrounding this crisis and the existing literature on crisis management and crisis leadership, university leaders should have been proactive in cultivating a more inclusive racial environment and should have more effectively used communication to improve relationships with an important constituency group, particularly given the institution's core values, the history of racial tensions at the university, and the rising racial tensions following incidents in nearby Ferguson, Missouri.

1 | INTRODUCTION

One measure for evaluating organizational leaders is their ability to predict and ideally, when possible, avert or mitigate potential crisis situations. When crises do arise, it is also expected that leaders demonstrate the competencies necessary to manage multiple dimensions simultaneously, including the ability to analyse the situation, mobilize appropriate resources, respond in an appropriate and timely manner, and communicate any decisions and their rationale to all relevant internal and external stakeholder groups. When the crisis has passed, an additional leadership responsibility is to debrief and analyse lessons that can be learned from the situation, and to implement corrective actions that can possibly prevent a recurrence of a similar crisis type. These many considerations and responsibilities are all inherently communicative, and communication theory allows for a deeper consideration of the dynamic and complex nature of leadership in crisis situations.

Each crisis situation presents a unique set of factors. The study of crisis management and crisis leadership is advanced by examining different crisis situations and their unique circumstances. The study of crises in university settings is a particularly rich and important area of research for scholars and a relevant area of interest for higher education leaders who must anticipate and effectively address the ever-increasing and wide-ranging crisis situations (Bataille & Cordova, 2014; Booker, 2014; Brown, Brown, & Billings, 2015; Coombs, 2008; Fortunato, 2008; Gigliotti, 2017; Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017; Kaler & Gigliotti, 2017; Ruben, 2005, 2016; Ruben, De Lisi & Gigliotti, 2017, Varma, 2011). In addition to the usual issues associated with crisis management, higher education leaders face the added challenge of addressing potential gaps that a crisis may reveal relative to the core values of an institution.

A series of events at the University of Missouri in 2015 provide an important and highly visible example of a crisis in higher education—one that presented critical challenges to the institution and its leadership that ultimately led to the departure of the university president and chancellor. In addition to the uniqueness of higher education as the setting, this case study amplifies the importance of organizational vulnerabilities from both an historical context and a national-issue context. A crisis including these contextual variables can lead to increased scrutiny of an organization and may have greater negative consequences for the organization dealing with the crisis.

In the case of the University of Missouri, the organization was under heightened scrutiny for recent accusations regarding race

relations on the flagship campus. However, as the forthcoming analysis suggests, the crisis was not isolated to these one-time incidents. Rather, the crisis may be better understood by acknowledging both the culmination of a series of historical decisions and actions on the issue of race and the national context in which the organization was situated. In this case, race had become a national focus following incidents in nearby Ferguson, Missouri.

In an attempt to analyse and better understand the nature of crisis leadership within the context of higher education, this article considers both the public messaging surrounding this specific crisis situation and the existing literature on crisis management and crisis leadership. The analysis of the public messaging surrounding this case seems to suggest that university leaders needed to develop an increased awareness of both the historical conditions and the national and regional context, particularly to adequately respond to a set of issues that reflect the core values of the organization and are as flammable, sensitive, and deeply personal as that of race.

Using the existing scholarly literature, we identified three central questions that guide our analysis of this specific case:

RQ1) Drawing on the crisis at the University of Missouri, what factors do leaders in higher education need to understand to improve their recognition and response to crisis situations?

RQ2) How can communication theory enhance our understanding of the crisis at the University of Missouri?

RQ3) What principles, practices, or strategies identified in this case may have broader applicability across organizational sectors?

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the pervasive nature of crisis in organizational settings, the existing scholarly literature is extensive and germane to understanding crisis situations across organizational sectors. What follows is a brief summary of the relevant literature related to three critical areas of crisis communication inquiry: the critical role of stakeholder relationships, approaches to the design and delivery of a crisis response, and an overview of the construct of sensemaking.

2.1 | Stakeholder relationships

The academic literature has produced a multitude of definitions for a crisis. Mitroff (2004) defines a crisis as "an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole organization" (p. 6). Some researchers have explicitly emphasized the role of stakeholders in their definition of a crisis. Coombs (2015a), for example, defines a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 3). Within the context of crisis situations, stakeholders may include the wide array of internal and external audiences that are directly or indirectly influenced by the crisis.

The need for building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholder groups in order for an organization to succeed has been consistently articulated (Fearn-Banks, 2001; Freeman, 1984; Goswick, Macgregor, Hurst, Wall, & White, 2017; Grunig, 2006; Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, & Grunig, 2015; Ledingham, 2006; Lewis, 2007). Davies, Chun, da Silva, and Roper (2003) define stakeholders as "any individuals or groups who may benefit from or be harmed by the actions of the organization" (p. 58). An organization's reputation, according to Kim et al. (2015), is often determined by organizational behaviours and organization–stakeholder relationships. They contend that stakeholders should be taken into consideration during the decision-making process. University stakeholder groups include current and prospective students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, and potential donors, along with a wide range of external groups, such as governmental agencies, employers, and the media. These many stakeholders often have competing goals, interests, and expectations as it relates to the purposes and plans of higher education.

Researchers point out that the relationships with stakeholders are built on an ongoing exchange of needs, expectations, and shared interests—all of which are continuously being monitored and evaluated. This continuous two-way dialogue between representatives of the organization and key stakeholder groups can lead to increased understanding and may be mutually beneficial (Freeman, 1984; Grunig, 2006; Ledingham, 2006; Lewis, 2007). The goal of this communication is to always improve the relationship—a relationship that hinges directly upon the willingness and capacity of organizational leaders and spokespeople to strengthen the relationship with their many constituency groups. This requires a deep knowledge of message content formation and the knowledge of message distribution and retrieval systems.

Leadership, from this perspective, is coconstructed between leaders and followers (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017), and is supported and sustained through relationship management. Formal leaders often play a pivotal role in cultivating the necessary communication interactions with internal and external stakeholders (Men & Stacks, 2014). Certainly, any number of individuals have an opportunity to demonstrate social influence in organizations (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016), yet the responsibilities associated with crisis leadership and managing stakeholder relationships are often limited to those with formal, positional authority in the organization (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996). Meng and Berger (2015) contend that leaders are fully or partially responsible for making strategic decisions, allocating resources, shaping the organizational culture, shaping the communication climate, and interacting with the media. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge that organizational leaders must accomplish the following:

> build a culture and coherent communication system that facilitates effective corporate interactions and communications and engages employees in the change process. Only in this way can the organization hope to encourage more supportive behaviors from both internal and

external audiences, and to acquire crucial knowledge about stakeholder needs and issues (pp. 314–315)

The relationship between a leader and the organization's stakeholder groups is especially critical during times of crisis. In a case study that examined how school officials responded when a tornado hit its community, Goswick et al. (2017) found that coalitions built prior to the occurrence of the crisis were instrumental in the ability to respond during and after the crisis. Once the organization is involved in the crisis, the authors emphasize the need for truthful and effective communication through many modes of communication to convey that the organization is supportive of the needs of stakeholders.

Importantly, it is the stakeholders' perceptions that help to define the severity of a crisis (Brown et al., 2015; Coombs, 2002, 2015a; Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Sohn & Lariscy, 2014). To some degree, there is an element of subjectivity in defining events and even using the term crisis, leading the word to be widely used and potentially overused (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017). If the stakeholders view events as crises, the leaders of the organization must define it as such and respond accordingly to the level of the stakeholders' expectations (Benoit, 1995; Brown et al., 2015; Gigliotti, 2017). For instance, as stated by Benoit (1995), it "is not whether *in fact* the actor caused the damage, but whether the relevant audience *believes* the actor to be the source of the reprehensible act" (p. 72; emphasis in original). Brown et al. (2015) extend this idea further to suggest that "since stakeholders are integral to an organization, when they perceive that an organization is encountering a crisis, a crisis indeed exists" (p. 291).

Recognizing that the organization and the various stakeholder audiences have different goals, values, expectations, and points of view, the leadership goal ultimately is to build mutual understanding and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Communication is critical to this process. In his study of the Duke University response to its lacrosse player scandal, for example, Fortunato (2008) contends the leadership communication challenge is to identify critical stakeholders, maintain continuous dialogue with all of these groups, and routinely evaluate one's crisis response from the perspective of these diverse audiences. This relationship management perspective needs to be complemented by reflecting the goals of persuasion, which involves convincing stakeholders that the organization is adequately responding to the crisis.

2.2 | Crisis response

A crisis response is necessary because some responsibility for the crisis is being attributed to the organization (Benoit, 1995). The actions that the organization takes in dealing with the crisis and how it communicatively responds during times of crisis could drastically diminish the harm if managed properly or significantly increase the harm if mismanaged (Benson, 1988; Brown et al., 2015; Coombs, 2015a).

Coombs (2015a, 2015b) explains that communication is essential throughout crisis management. Coombs (2006) summarizes the components of an effective crisis response through three fundamental concepts: be quick, consistent, and open. Being quick is simply about providing stakeholders with information about the crisis. The importance of being quick is that it fills the information vacuum. Coombs (2006) states, "a quick response is an active response because it tries to fill the vacuum with facts. A slow response allows others to fill the vacuum with speculation and/or misinformation. Those others could be ill-informed or could use the opportunity to attack the organization" (p. 172). A quick response also provides a sense that the organization recognizes the severity and is in control of the situation. The need for an expeditious crisis response is especially amplified in a social media environment (Brown et al., 2015; Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011), and in this environment, a quick response is now expected by stakeholders (Men & Stacks, 2014).

In addition to a need for a rapid response, social media provide a vehicle for individuals to enter into the dialogue surrounding the crisis. Brown et al. (2015) define what they refer to as active stakeholders, "people not only affected but willing to publicly comment about the crisis" (p. 304). They claim "social media makes the community a part of a crisis communication response via citizen journalism" (p. 294). They also indicate that traditional media outlets integrate tweets and social media postings into their own content. For example, Brown et al. (2015) document how during the Penn State University sexual abuse scandal fans complained on social media about the slow response of university officials and the overall lack of transparency concerning the situation. This study illustrates how through the use of social media, "fans effectively become an unsolicited and unsanctioned—yet powerful—arm of a university's crisis response strategy" (p. 290).

Both consistency and transparency are important dimensions of communication during times of crisis. Contradictory statements or a failure to disclose relevant facts could lead to a second crisis, with the organization receiving criticism for its culpability in the initial event occurring and now receiving criticism for its poor crisis response. For these reasons, many advocate for the need for media training as a way of preparing leaders to effectively execute crisis responses (Fearn-Banks, 2011; Gardner, 2016).

The image restoration theory attributed to Benoit (1995, 1997) is one of the more recognized models for how to overcome a crisis and repair a reputation. The theory of image restoration posits communication as goal-driven and designed to maintain a positive reputation and repair a tattered image. The theory of image restoration identifies five general defence strategies that the organization can implement: (i) a denial strategy where the organization claims there is no crisis and offers a simple denial that it did not perform the act in question, (ii) an evasion of responsibility strategy where the organization clams it did not have the ability to prevent the crisis, (iii) an attempt to reduce the offensiveness of the act by the organization by reinforcing through communication the positive traits of the organization, thus creating a more complete context within which the organization should be evaluated, (iv) a corrective action strategy, where the organization implements steps to solve the problem and

prevent a repeat of the crisis, and (v) a mortification strategy, where the organization accepts responsibility for the act and apologizes (Benoit, 1995, 1997, 2000). It is important to point out that often not one singular strategy is implemented, but several response actions and communication initiatives occur simultaneously (Fortunato, 2008).

Researchers are unequivocal that corrective action is the most effective response for performance-related issues (Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Reid, 2013; Robitaille, 2011; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011). Ulmer et al. (2011) stress that crisis situations present threats to an organization's goals while simultaneously offering the organization growth and learning opportunities. They argue that organizations must have a prospective vs. retrospective vision, emphasizing that they "learn from their mistakes, infuse their communication with bold optimism, and stress rebuilding rather than issues of blame or fault" (p. 18). This learning ideally will help the organization "ensure that it will not experience a similar crisis in the future" (p. 18).

Robitaille (2011) explains that although corrective action involves a commitment of money, time, and effort, through thoughtful deliberation and responsible planning these investments can lead to positive market outcomes. The organization may achieve goodwill as a result of taking corrective action, with some going so far as to suggest that these actions can position the organization as a leader on a particular issue or set of issues (Fortunato, 2008; Reid, 2013; Robitaille, 2011; Ulmer et al., 2011). To do so, it becomes imperative to communicate corrective action measures and to verify the effectiveness of corrective actions implemented.

The effectiveness of any response is mitigated by the nature of the transgression (Coombs, 2002; Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Fortunato, 2015; Goswick et al., 2017; Sohn & Lariscy, 2014). Obviously, the more egregious the transgression, the more difficult it will be for the organization to overcome the crisis. Sohn and Lariscy (2014) make a distinction between a reputational crisis, one that "can be explained as a consequence of a specific critical incident" (pp. 24–25) and a reputational problem, one "more likely caused by an ongoing weakness or shortcoming, such as a managerial inefficiency or failure to cultivate a strong and favorable name for the organization" (p. 25). A reputational problem reflects the organization's history. Coombs (2006, 2015b) indicates that crisis history, whether or not the organization had similar crises in the past, its performance in handling previous crises—how well or poorly the organization has treated stakeholders, and crisis severity—the amount of damage inflicted by the crisis, are mitigating factors in how the organization will be evaluated in its current crisis. Varma (2011) found that a positive university reputation can enhance a positive evaluation of its crisis management efforts.

Finally, while it is likely that some crisis will arise at some point, leaders need to be proactive in developing strategies to prevent a crisis from even occurring (Fearn-Banks, 2011). Fearn-Banks (2011) advocates for developing a crisis prevention plan in which potential crises are identified and prioritized based on the criteria of likelihood and devastation. While organizations plan for crises ranked high in both likelihood and devastation, Fearn-Banks (2011) emphasizes planning for the most devastating of crisis situations no matter how likely or unlikely it would be to occur.

2.3 | Sensemaking

Crisis situations are often fraught with much ambiguity and uncertainty. The literature on sensemaking details how individuals "structure the unknown" (Waterman, 1990, p. 41) as a way of constructing that which then becomes sensible to those whom one leads (Weick, 1995). The full details of an organizational crisis are often unknown to organizational leaders; yet, as primary decision-makers and spokespeople for the organization, leaders must simultaneously learn *and* communicate during these moments of complexity (Smerek, 2009). In his analysis of the seven properties of sensemaking, Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as a process that is retrospective, grounded in identity construction, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 17).

In order to make sense of uncertain and unpredictable organizational circumstances, the impetus often lies with the leader to bracket and punctuate past events, or as Weick (1995) describes the process, to "create breaks in the stream and impose categories on those portions that are set apart. When people bracket, they act as if there is something out there to be discovered" (p. 35). This communicative process of enactment, along with sensemaking in its entirety, often influences the direction of particular organizational events (Weick, 1988). This way of thinking about the role of the leader is also characterized as "framing" by a number of leadership communication scholars (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

Thayer (1988) extends the phenomenon of sensemaking into the domain of leadership:

> [A leader is] one who alters or guides the manner in which his followers "mind" the world by giving it a compelling "face." A leader at work is one who gives others a different sense of the meaning of that which they do by recreating it in a different form, a different "face," in the same way that a pivotal painter or sculptor or poet gives those who follow him (or her) a different way of "seeing" – and therefore saying and doing and knowing in the world. A leader does not tell it "as it is"; he tells it as it *might be*, giving what "is" thereby a different "face"... The leader is a sense-*giver*. The leader always *embodies* the possibilities of escape from what might otherwise appear to us to be incomprehensible, or from what might otherwise appear to us to be a chaotic, indifferent, or incorrigible world – one over which we have no ultimate control (p. 250, 254)

It is collectively these three intersecting areas of the literature that help us understand some of the important deficits in the crisis recognition and response from the leaders at the University of Missouri.

3 | THE APPROACH

The incidents at the University of Missouri provide a rich and nuanced case for scholarly analysis. This article seeks to explore the many interrelated factors and events, including the role of stakeholders, the media environment, and the historical context of racial tensions that contributed to the "crisis" at the University of Missouri. It is the actions of leaders at Missouri—both the messages sent and the decisions made—that serve as the data set for this analysis.

The article focuses primarily on public messaging associated with these events, and as such, we rely on media accounts of the incidents at the University of Missouri—the crisis as publicly defined and portrayed. The relevant academic literature summarized in this article allowed us to analyse the nuances of this case based on the available public messaging surrounding the crisis. Furthermore, the best practices detailed in this literature and summarized in this article help to better understand the dynamics of crisis management and illustrate a number of connections between the theory and practice of crisis leadership.

4 | THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI CASE

A series of incidents in 2015 escalated racial tensions at the University of Missouri, where 7% of the 35,000 students at the main campus in Columbia is African American (Deere & Addo, 2015). In April, a freshman student was arrested and charged with second-degree property damage motivated by discrimination for drawing a swastika with the word "heil" on the wall of a dormitory stairway. The student would plead guilty to a lesser charge and receive 2 years' probation. The number of racial incidents increased during the fall, including a situation involving the use of a racial slur to refer to the Missouri Student Body President, Payton Head, an African American student. Head indicated that it was not the first time he was subjected to racial slurs, as he mentioned on social media (Deere & Addo, 2015).

On October 5, during a rehearsal for an upcoming Homecoming ceremony performance, a drunk, White, male student used a racially insensitive term to call out the Members of the Legion of Black Collegians. The campus safety officer present during the incident did not respond with any urgency, furthering the group's anger (Addo, 2015a). The student who yelled the slur was identified and removed from campus. In response to these incidents, and others, students from across campus used social media to voice their concerns about the climate of the campus. On October 6, Missouri Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin posted a video on the Chancellor's website stating, "it's enough. Let's stop this. Let's end hatred and racism at Mizzou. We're part of the same family. You don't hate your family" (Addo, 2015a). Three days later, the university announced that all incoming freshman would receive online diversity training focusing on student responsibility and inclusivity (Addo, 2015a).

On October 10, during the University's Homecoming Parade, the student activist group, Concerned Student 1950, blocked the car of University President Timothy M. Wolfe. Concerned Student 1950 originated as "MU for Michael Brown" to protest the shooting of African American Brown by a White police officer in nearby Ferguson, Missouri. The group changed its name to Concerned Student 1950 in acknowledgement of the first year that African Americans were admitted to Missouri. Wolfe did not get out of the car, nor did he speak directly with the students. The Concerned Student 1950 group was shouted down by a group of White bystanders chanting "M-I-Z-Z-O-U," until police removed the protesters. As explained by Jonathan Butler, a graduate student protestor, "we disrupted the parade specifically in front of Tim Wolfe because we need him to get our message" (Deere & Addo, 2015).

The Concerned Student 1950 group on October 21 publicized a series of demands, most notably for Wolfe to apologize to the Homecoming day protestors and resign. Other demands included an increase in African American faculty and staff, and mandatory racial awareness and inclusion for all faculty, staff, and students. On that same day, the University of Missouri Board of Curators met in a closed-door session to discuss Chancellor Loftin's leadership in the light of the racial incidents. Nine deans on campus also released a letter calling for Loftin to resign. According to David Kurpius, Dean of the Missouri School of Journalism, "the environment on campus is not conducive to moving forward, resolving issues and trying to make sure that all of our students are in a good learning environment" (Deere & Addo, 2015). The Concerned Student 1950 group eventually met with President Wolfe on October 27, reporting that he would not meet any of the demands of the group. The group issued the following statement: "Wolfe verbally acknowledged that he cared for Black students at the University of Missouri, however, he also reported he was "not completely" aware of systemic racism, sexism, and patriarchy on campus" (Deere & Addo, 2015). The Concerned Student 1950 group decided to boycott university dining and retail services (Addo, 2015b).

On November 2, graduate student Jonathan Butler began a hunger strike and announced that it would continue until Wolfe resigned, leading other students to also camp out in support of Butler. Wolfe released a statement of apology on November 6 for how he handled the Homecoming protests, acknowledging that "my behavior seemed like I did not care. That was not my intention. I was caught off guard in that moment. Nonetheless, had I gotten out of the car to acknowledge the students and talk with them, perhaps we wouldn't be where we are today" (Deere & Addo, 2015). Wolfe also expressed concern for Butler's health.

On Saturday, November 7, Wolfe, while fundraising in Kansas City, was confronted by protestors who asked him to define systematic oppression. He responded accordingly: "I will give you an answer, and I'm sure it'll be a wrong answer. Systematic oppression is because you don't believe that you have the equal opportunity for success" (Addo, 2015b). The message was met with great resistance by the student protestors who suggested that Wolfe, in his response, was shifting the blame for systematic oppression on them. That same day, the story reached heightened national media attention when the University of Missouri football team announced that

it was joining the student protestors. A statement by the football team released on Twitter read "we will no longer participate in any football-related activities until President Wolfe resigns or is removed due to his negligence toward marginalizing students' experiences" (Addo, 2015b). Several players retweeted the statement. In response to these tweets, the Missouri athletic department stated that it is "aware of the declarations made tonight by many of our student-athletes. We all must come together with leaders across our campus to tackle these challenging issues, and we support our student-athletes' right to do so" (Addo, 2015b). On November 8, Missouri Head Coach Gary Pinkel tweeted his support of his players that included a photograph of African American and White players together with their arms interlocked. Missouri would stand to lose $1 million if it forfeited its game against Brigham Young University scheduled for November 14 (Editorial Board, 2015).

As these events transpired across the university, reporting by Stripling (2015) describes the scrambling of administrators "behind the scenes" in managing the unfolding situation. Leaders communicated by e-mail throughout the situation about a host of different topics related to the crisis, including the need to provide "mental-health resources" to the protestors on campus, the debate over whether or not to prevent access to particular social media sites based on some of the threats being made, and the necessary strategies to "do everything humanly possible to support our students in their free expression." This summary of the e-mails points to what appeared to be a strong desire to effectively address the crisis, yet it appears that the communication and response came too late to extinguish the spiralling crisis.

On Monday, November 9, Wolfe resigned just as the Board of Curators was beginning an emergency meeting to discuss the racial atmosphere on campus. In his nationally televised on-campus announcement, Wolfe asked for the community to "use my resignation to heal and start talking again." He added, "this is not, I repeat not, the way change should come about. Change should come about from listening, learning, caring and conversation. My decision to resign comes out of love, not hate" (Deere & Addo, 2015). Loftin later that day announced he would resign as Chancellor and take a lesser role within the university. After the resignations, student celebrations erupted on campus, Jonathan Butler ended his hunger strike, and the football team returned to practice. Donald L. Cupps, chairman of the Board of Curators, suggested that "the problems that we have experienced can't be blamed on President Wolfe. It can't be blamed on Chancellor Loftin. It's got to be blamed on all of us. It's the fellow students that say things they shouldn't or do things they shouldn't. It's the faculty, staff, employees that do not do what they should do. As board members we have to examine ourselves" (Deere & Addo, 2015). Cupps went on to announce the formation of a task force, the hiring of a diversity, inclusion, and equity officer, and a promise to have the faculty and staff better reflect the student body.

National reactions to the resignations included White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest supporting the protestors in saying, "a few people standing up and speaking out can have a profound impact on the places where we live and work" (Deere & Addo, 2015). Emily Dickens, vice president for public policy for the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, stated, "a public university has a public agenda and an academic agenda. The needs of addressing civil rights and diversity and racism are some of the things that a university can take a lead on. After Ferguson, the students saw that the university could have taken a stand. Students are looking for leadership" (Deere & Addo, 2015). The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published an editorial that read, "there is perhaps no better place for significant and lasting social change to begin percolating than on the campus of a public university. It is a laboratory with an academic agenda where big ideas can flourish. The agenda should keep civil rights always in the forefront, and should include scholarship, racial and religious tolerance and cultural acceptance" (Editorial Board, 2015).

Henry Foley, University of Missouri executive vice president for academic affairs, research, and economic development, was appointed interim chancellor. Michael Middleton was appointed interim president, known for being the university's first African American law professor and founder of the Legion of Black Collegians who in 1969 delivered a list of race-related demands to the University of Missouri chancellor. At a news conference on November 12, Middleton acknowledged "it is imperative to hear from all students and do everything we can to make them comfortable and safe in our community." He added, "one of the things impeding our ability to get beyond these issues is our inability to talk about it. We have to understand our ugly history permeates everything we do at this institution and in this country. Once we get this truth on the table, we're poised to reconcile those differences" (Stuckey & Addo, 2015).

The series of events has been identified as a primary reason for the reduction in the number of applications and tuition deposits for enrolment for the Fall 2016 semester. As of February 2016, the university projected 900 fewer freshmen in its 2016 class than its 2015 class. Barbara Rupp, Missouri director of admissions, explicitly connected the crises with the enrolment estimates saying the decline is "undoubtedly part of the aftermath last fall" (Addo, 2016). Applications from out of state have particularly declined, causing Rupp to comment "because those students are geographically removed from the campus, they don't have a sense of what's going on and they are relying on what they are seeing and hearing in the media. And it's not particularly positive" (Addo, 2016). University leaders acknowledged the public perception of this crisis in their public statement on November 11: "We feel the weight of the world's eyes upon us...We will not flinch from the work ahead" (Stripling, 2015).

5 | DISCUSSION

The study of crisis management and crisis leadership is advanced by examining different crisis situations and their unique circumstances. In addition to investigating a particular type of crisis within the context of higher education, this case study also amplifies the importance of organizational vulnerabilities from both an historical context and a national-issue context. A crisis that includes these contextual variables can lead to increased scrutiny of an organization and may have greater

negative consequences. Both crisis management and crisis leadership call for an awareness of and response to these contextual variables.

An analysis of the University of Missouri case highlights the importance of several critical components of crisis leadership and the consequences when these components do not receive sufficient attention by leaders. Consistent with the literature on crisis management and crisis leadership, this article identifies and discusses four notable areas of tension between the best practices offered in the literature and the decisions and actions reportedly followed by the senior administrators at Missouri: (i) the development and maintenance of strong relationships with key stakeholder groups, (ii) the ability to predict, recognize, detect, and address issues that may rise to the level of crisis as defined by stakeholders, particularly the historical context and national-issue context variables, (iii) the skill to craft timely, sensitive messages and effectively utilize interpersonal and mediated channels of message distribution and retrieval, especially social media, so there is adequate information flow to and from institutional leaders allowing them to learn of, understand, and address stakeholders' concerns as they emerge, and (iv) the ability to identify and analyse lessons that can be learned from the situation and implement corrective actions to possibly prevent a recurrence of a similar crisis type.

Each particular misstep, inaction, or according to some critics, failure, on behalf of those in leadership roles at the University of Missouri to some degree precipitated the next source of controversy. For example, the lack of attention to building and maintaining the necessary relationships through communication with key stakeholders perhaps contributed to an inability to fully recognize—or at least acknowledge—the severity of the crisis, which led to what some would acknowledge as the failure to respond in an appropriate and timely manner. In many ways, crisis leadership relies upon both relationship management *and* persuasion in convincing stakeholders that the organization is adequately responding to the crisis.

The need for continuous dialogue with key stakeholder groups (Freeman, 1984; Grunig, 2006; Ledingham, 2006; Lewis, 2007), a central communication principle as discussed previously, seems especially critical in the light of the incidents at the University of Missouri. One essential lesson that emerges from the Missouri case is that competent leadership involves an understanding of the critical role of communication in developing and maintaining strong relationships with key stakeholder groups. Another noteworthy leadership lesson to emerge from the analysis is the need for leaders to recognize, detect, and address those issues that may rise to the level of crisis, as defined by stakeholders. Shortcomings in perspective taking and empathy can become critical vulnerabilities for leaders in all stages of crisis leadership. As the sensemaking literature points out, systems and structures need to be developed and implemented so that there is adequate information flow to the leaders allowing them to learn of, understand, and address stakeholders' concerns as they emerge, and to allow them to structure a response that is consistent with the experiences and perceptions of these key stakeholder groups.

University leaders appear to have overlooked the significant role of context—the historical context provided by ongoing sensitive issues that developed over time on the campus, and the national-issue context with a series of racial incidents unfolding in communities across the state and the nation. Crises are too often viewed as singular, unique events, whereas in certain circumstances, some could be better characterized as a culmination of events and conditions that led to an ultimate eruption point. At Missouri, it is reported that the recent racially charged incidents were symptomatic of more environmental and systemic issues related to the campus climate—a climate that precedes 2015 and one that was influenced by an array of actions, decisions, expectations, and behaviours exhibited during the university's recent history (Stripling, 2015).

An understanding of the historical antecedent conditions—both at the institution and in the broader national context—contributes to a more holistic understanding of the complicated situation at the University. Given the University of Missouri's relatively close proximity to Ferguson—a city that experienced multiple protests in response triggered by the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old Black man, by Darren Wilson, a White Ferguson police officer—there is a certain puzzlement associated with the administrators' initial lack of sensitivity towards the issues. Sensitivity to perceived similarities between elements of the Ferguson climate and those at the University of Missouri should have been a consideration by campus administrators as it apparently was by members of other campus constituencies. An awareness of historic vulnerabilities for the organization and the broader national dialogue surrounding a hot-button issue in relation to the organization's core mission and values need to be more prominently considered in the crisis literature. These variables may be included in the evaluative criteria used by organizations of all kinds as leaders determine crises that may be on the horizon and implement crisis prevention measures.

With the benefit of both understanding and appreciating the intensity of stakeholder's concerns, it becomes possible for stakeholders' perspectives to be more meaningfully taken account of in leadership decision-making and in subsequent communication. Competent leadership communication then involves the ability to craft carefully designed messages that will resonate with diverse stakeholders. Leaders need to employ the communication skills necessary to engage, interact effectively, and understand their key stakeholders, and the quality of these communication encounters must be deemed sufficient and acceptable by stakeholders. Similar to how stakeholders define whether or not a situation rises to the level of crisis, so too do these stakeholders determine whether communication interactions are sufficient and effective. The determination of whether communication processes are appropriate and sufficient cannot be made by leaders alone—but rather must take account of the perceptions and judgements of stakeholders.

An understanding of the critical role of social media in distributing and retrieving messages during crises situations cannot be underestimated. Social media operate at a speed that has the potential to intensify the elements of a crisis. At the same time, these same media have the potential, if used skilfully by leaders, to rapidly respond to quickly calm tensions. Unfortunately, the perceived failure to respond in an appropriate and timely manner exacerbated the tensions on Missouri's campus and further contributed to the perceived lack of responsiveness and concern of the administration,

leading ultimately to the removal of the university president and chancellor. By failing to respond quickly, there was a perception that racial issues and those articulating the issues were not a priority and that leaders were not in control of the situation, heightening community frustration and hostility, and allowing the members of the community to fill the information vacuum.

Several executives at leading marketing and public relations firms commented on the dangers of a slow response (Gardner, 2016). For example, Robert Moore, president of the Lipman Hearne marketing and communications company, referred to the slow response by Missouri leaders as "a self-inflicted wound" (Gardner, 2016). Gene Grabowski, a crisis management partner for the kglobal public relations firm added that leaders do not have as much time to assess the situation as they would like, stating, "effective communication in a crisis is all about time" (Gardner, 2016). It was the lack of a quick response that provided the environmental conditions that likely led the football team to announce that it was not going to participate in football-related activities. This event amplified the crisis to a story being widely reported upon in the national media, including many sports outlets, such as ESPN, that might not have covered the story, allowing it to reach a much broader audience.

Once events have reached a stage of "crisis," identifying appropriate corrective actions and clearly articulating these actions to the affected community is a critical task for leaders (Benoit, 1995, 1997; Coombs, 2006, 2015b; Reid, 2013; Robitaille, 2011). In part, corrective actions help to ensure that similar incidents will not occur in the future. Corrective actions also provide leaders with positive messages to contribute following crises. The University of Missouri did implement several corrective actions, including the appointment of new senior leaders in the roles of president and chancellor, the hiring of a diversity, inclusion, and equity officer, the creation of a task force to develop strategies for improving diversity and inclusion, the mandate of a new diversity and inclusion training programme for all faculty, staff, and incoming students, and the establishment of a system to provide support to students, faculty, and staff who experience discrimination (Addo, 2015b; Eligon & Perez-Pena, 2015; Stripling, 2015). However, the timing of these decisions and the number and intensity of previous events came too late to salvage the reputation and positions of current leaders, and may well have also been too late for the institution to fully benefit from these measures. This reveals that corrective actions cannot be singular, one-time actions; but rather they must consist of sustained changes that lead to a change in culture that is inclusive of all stakeholders.

To conclude, as supported by the existing literature, this specific case highlights the centrality of communication, both reception and distribution of messages, in the management and leadership of a crisis. As leaders across all organizational sectors wrestle with the challenges of crisis situations, awareness of organizational vulnerabilities continues to emerge as a critical priority. So too does the importance of aligning communication strategy with the espoused mission, vision, and values of an organization.

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