Smoke Detectors and Fire Extinguishers

How German Crisis Communication Professionals Involve Internal Stakeholders in Pre-Crisis Management

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Master's Thesis
June 2022

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ABSTRACT

Anyone who wants to protect their home from fire is well advised to have smoke detectors and fire extinguishers. For organisations, crises can feel like their house is burning. That is because crises can cause tremendous harm to them and their stakeholders. However, in times of increasing uncertainty, no organisation is immune to it. Instead of being reactive in the crisis phase, organisations must become active already in the pre-crisis phase. Metaphorically speaking, preventive and preparatory measures for organisations can serve as crisis detectors and extinguishers.

Crisis communication is a vital part of effective crisis management. In academia and practice, a crucial aspect has been overlooked for a long time: Crisis communication has mainly focused on the external perspective. It is only in the last ten years that internal stakeholders have been more widely as increasingly valuable actors. In addition to management, it is increasingly acknowledged that employees can help prevent crises and should be involved in the preparation. The thesis contributes to a better understanding of the field by conducting qualitative research and poses the question: *How do German crisis communication professionals approach the involvement of internal stakeholders in pre-crisis management?*

In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 experts from Germany. Their knowledge and experiences were analysed inductively with the help of thematic analysis. The results show that the German experts strove to provide excellent pre-crisis communication and that, for them, this naturally included the involvement of both managers and employees. This illustrates that while the internal perspective in crisis communication is understudied in academia, it is highly valued in practice. A holistic approach to internal and external communication is needed.

Experts used risk, issues, and reputation management to prevent or mitigate crises. In addition, they acted as internal advisors, alerting management when a decision could be reputationally damaging. Regarding crisis preparation, regular training, crisis plans, templates, and establishing the spatial and technical infrastructure are standard. All practices must remain realistic and practically applicable. What emerged strongly in the analysis, however, is the magnitude of the influence of organisational factors, namely coordination and institutionalisation of pre-crisis management and the culture. The prioritisation of the pre-crisis phase in the overall organisation is crucial. Moreover, processes and structures must run smoothly, and interdepartmental cooperation is decisive. A high-reliability culture is conducive to crisis management. Building trust is one component of it, and communication professionals could mediate between employees and managers. They should also work on crisis sensitisation and resilience. Furthermore, good leadership – not only at the senior level – is a relevant influencing factor. Communication should try to enable and positively influence these organisational factors as a driving force, simultaneously demonstrating its own strategic value. As a precondition, communication needs to be professionalised. This applies to both its role within the organisation and the capabilities of the communication department.

KEYWORDS: *internal crisis communication, pre-crisis management, internal stakeholders, crisis prevention, crisis preparation*

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1   Introduction

Damage to reputation, financial losses and a threat of the business model going down the drain – crises can become severe nightmares for organisations (Coombs, 2020; Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2003). Not only from an organisational perspective but also from the perspective of society as a whole, organisational crises can cause serious damage. In crises, not only stakeholder expectations are violated, but various stakeholders can be negatively affected (Coombs, 2019). Consequently, more crises lead to more people suffering from them.

No organisation is immune to crises (Coombs, 2019; Jaques, 2016). In a so-called risk society with increasing uncertainty (Beck, 2007/2009), there is a constant possibility of crises occurring; or, as Frandsen and Johansen (2017) put it, "Crisis is becoming the norm" (p. 1). A survey conducted by the auditing and risk consultancy firm Deloitte (2018) across 20 countries reflects that 80 per cent of organisations mobilised their crisis management team within the past two years. Due to global and regional crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020 and the war in Ukraine in 2022, it is likely that many organisations increasingly find themselves in crisis mode nowadays as these crises affect many aspects of their operations.

To cope with this development, management in the pre-crisis phase is decisive. This includes effective crisis prevention on one side and effective crisis preparation on the other (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). Based on the idea of Jaques (2013), the metaphor of a homeowner illustrates that prevention and preparation are equally important. Anyone who owns a home would do well to install smoke detectors to notice any sign of a fire in time and prevent an outbreak. Nevertheless, if a fire does break out, it would be wise to have a fire extinguisher at home – that is, to be prepared. Likewise, organisations need to engage in both crisis prevention and preparation.

The pre-crisis phase has been marginalised for a long time in practice. Organisations prefer not to reveal that they nearly had a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). An exception to this is risk management because organisations consider it less difficult to talk publicly about what risks they need to deal with at the operational level to prevent crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). The pre-crisis phase has also been neglected in academia, as many case studies are conducted after a crisis has broken out (Heide, 2013). This may be more feasible but contrasts with the relevance of the pre-crisis phase. When studying the pre-crisis phase, there is a stronger preference for preparation than prevention (Jaques, 2013). Given that "the best crisis is the one which does not happen" (Jaques, 2013, p. 286), it is remarkable that

crisis prevention is underestimated. Overall, it is worthwhile for both the practice field and research to pay more attention to the pre-crisis phase.

For organisational crisis management to succeed, several departments within an organisation must cooperate. Crisis communication plays a central role in this (Griffin, 2014; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Communication is already of great value to organisations in their everyday business. As Zerfaß and Viertmann (2017) illustrate in their communication value circle framework, it can create business value by enabling operations (for example, by stimulating publicity), building intangibles (for example, reputation), ensuring flexibility (for example, trusting relationships) and adapting strategy (for example, thought leadership). Crisis communication, however, is where communication can particularly demonstrate its strategic value (Heide, 2021). In critical situations, the role of communication as a mediator between the organisation and its stakeholders becomes particularly important (Fearn-Banks, 2016). Coombs (2019) states that crisis management will not produce an adequate effect when crisis communication is ineffective.

For communication professionals, it thus presents an opportunity to underline the strategic importance of their work within the organisation (Schwarz, 2015). Heide and Simonsson (2014) note an overall need for more research on communication professionals and their crisis communication practices. Heide (2021) states that the communication department's focus is often primarily on external messages and public attention. This tempts many communicators to remain stuck in patterns of old media logic instead of being strategic partners within the organisation (Heide, 2021). Hence, research with crisis communication professionals on the role of internal stakeholders in crisis communication helps fill the research gap and offers practitioners valuable insights for their work.

Not only in practice but also in academia, internal stakeholders have long been disregarded (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Johansen et al., 2012). Taylor stated in 2010, "I am challenging researchers to add another area to their study of crisis: an internal organisational component" (p. 698). In the past decade, internal stakeholders have moved more into the centre of attention of research and practice (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). Still, many aspects need more detailed research.

The focus on external aspects remains prevalent in today's research. Most crisis communication scholars have an educational background in public relations research, which by its nature, has a stronger focus on external communication (Heide, 2021). In addition, it can be difficult for researchers in some countries to gain insights into organisations, leading

them to investigate mainly external dimensions (Heide, 2013). When internal crisis communication is examined, a strong focus on the crisis phase itself can be observed (e.g., Jin et al., 2020; Korn & Einwiller, 2013; Opitz et al., 2018; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). Furthermore, in the cases when internal pre-crisis communication is researched empirically, a dominance of quantitative research can be observed (e.g., Johansen et al., 2012; Sax & Torp, 2015; Schwarz & Büker, 2019). A qualitative study on this topic thus contributes to broadening the academic perspective.

Besides the insufficient scientific research, it is of high social relevance to consider internal stakeholders in crisis communication, too. Heide (2013) regards employees as the most important resource here because they make a valuable contribution in every crisis phase. Managers are also influential stakeholders (Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Johansen et al., 2012). In fact, for a long time, only managers were seen as active players in pre-crisis management. However, this is now considered outdated. Instead, both employees and managers are perceived as receivers and senders of information (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011, 2017; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). For example, in the pre-crisis phase, every internal stakeholder can receive warning signals of crises (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). If they report them, organisations will have a higher chance of preventing these crises or preparing for them (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Neglecting one stakeholder group reduces the flow of information. It is not only from the perspective of the organisations as a whole that it makes sense to involve internal stakeholders. The individuals feel more valued in the organisation as well (Wæraas & Dahle, 2020), which leads to mutual benefit.

Based on the social and scientific relevance outlined above, the thesis poses the research question: *How do German crisis communication professionals approach the involvement of internal stakeholders in pre-crisis management?* As aforementioned, the pre-crisis phase consists of crisis prevention and crisis preparation. To obtain a more precise differentiation in the research, the study includes two sub-questions:

(1) *Which aspects of internal crisis communication are crucial for the success of crisis prevention in organisations in Germany?*
(2) *Which aspects of internal crisis communication are crucial for the success of crisis preparation in organisations in Germany?*

While the theoretical framework gives an overview of the field per se, the empirical part of the thesis aims to provide an insight into the situation of internal pre-crisis communication

in Germany. It is worthwhile to investigate the experiences of German experts academically for several reasons. Many German organisations are crisis experienced. The European Communication Monitor 2013, which is a survey of 2,710 public relations professionals from 43 countries, shows that 74.4 per cent of the German respondents faced a crisis within one year, which is more than in any other European country (European average: 68.1 per cent) (Zerfaß et al., 2013). Schwarz (2016) states that crisis communication is becoming increasingly established in the practice of German communication professionals, but German research is lagging behind this development. Besides Schwarz (e.g., Schwarz & Büker, 2019; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011; Schwarz et al., 2016), there are only a few researchers who approach internal pre-crisis communication empirically in Germany (e.g., Drews, 2018; Hahn & Neuss, 2018). Consequently, academia and practice are not yet sufficiently brought together.

This thesis deals with the research question qualitatively. Expert interviews were conducted and analysed with thematic analysis. Specifically, 11 communication professionals with extensive experience in crisis communication from large organisations in Germany were interviewed in-depth. This method enabled rich, comprehensive insights (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Their knowledge was then grouped into main themes and sub-themes in six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The thesis is structured as follows to adequately answer the research question and related sub-questions. First, the theoretical framework provides an overview of academic research. It explains the importance of the pre-crisis phase in crisis communication and describes the state of research on internal stakeholders in more detail. Furthermore, it presents insights into theoretical and empirical research on concrete internal crisis prevention and preparation measures. Influencing factors of the organisation, such as culture and leadership, are examined, too. Secondly, the methodological overview describes why expert interviews are appropriate for answering the research question and how they were conducted. Afterwards, it is outlined how the thematic analysis was performed per scientific standards. Thirdly, four main themes that emerged from the interviews are discussed in the results: *coordination and institutionalisation*, *culture*, *professionalisation of communication*, and *pre-crisis communication practices*. The thesis ends with a conclusion that summarises the main findings, offers theoretical and practical implications, critically reflects on the research and gives an outlook on possible future research.

2   Theoretical Framework

The following chapter provides the theoretical foundation for this thesis. It begins by explaining pre-crisis communication and its importance. After that, the role of internal stakeholders is discussed. Subsequently, the components of internal crisis prevention and preparation are explained. Finally, it deals with influencing factors from the organisation itself, with a focus on organisational culture and leadership style.

2.1   Pre-Crisis Communication

A crisis is "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organisation, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name" (Fearn-Banks, 2016, p. 1). It interrupts day-to-day business and can jeopardise the license to operate (Fearn-Banks, 2016; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). While crises can be somewhat helpful, for example, as learning opportunities (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021), most organisations try to avoid or at least control such occurrences through crisis management. For this purpose, strategic decisions must be made, implemented, and communicated (Griffin, 2014).

Crisis communication is part of the overall organisational crisis management and plays a central role in its success (Griffin, 2014; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Frandsen and Johansen (2017) define crisis management "as the conceptualisation, implementation, maintenance, and activation of the crisis preparedness (systems) of a private or public organisation" (p. 53). Since crises are influential in many disciplines, there are a few related fields in academia besides crisis management and crisis communication. These are, for example, disaster and emergency management, which public emergency response organisations mostly carry out, or business continuity management, which has a stronger focus on the availability of products and services (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Crises can take many forms, from product recalls or labour disputes to criminal activities by members of the organisation, cybercrime and much more. At the same time, there are atypical crises which are difficult to categorise (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Consequently, crisis management must be tailored to a wide variety of situations.

The three-stage approach divides crisis management into the following phases: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Coombs, 2019). In these phases, the task of crisis communication is to create a dialogue between the organisation and its stakeholders, whereby strategies and tactics minimise potential damage to the organisation (Fearn-Banks, 2016). Academic research

highlights the pre-crisis stage as being of particular importance. Many crises can be anticipated in advance, and an early response can limit the threats (Mazzei & Butera, 2021; Taylor, 2010). Hence, Heide (2021) describes the pre-crisis stage as the most important phase in crisis management. Coombs and Holladay (2002) established the well-known Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which provides an insight into why pre-crisis communication is vital. According to the theory, there are three types of crises. Firstly, the victim crisis, in which crisis responsibility on the part of the organisation is minimal and reputational damage is low. This includes, for example, natural disasters that make organisations victims of external circumstances. Secondly, there is the accident crisis, triggered by unintentional actions, such as technical breakdowns. In this case, the public assesses the crisis blame as moderate, and the damage to reputation remains manageable. Thirdly, the preventable crisis, for example, human error. This type is most threatening to the reputation since, as the name suggests, stakeholders believe that the company could have avoided the crisis. If organisations improve their pre-crisis management, a crisis of such magnitude might not occur (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

However, researchers indicate that not all crises can be prevented but rather mitigated (Coombs, 2019; Griffin, 2014). For instance, many agencies work to prevent terrorist attacks, but sometimes, they happen nonetheless. Organisations need to be prepared for such contingencies (Griffin, 2014). For this reason, pre-crisis communication is not only based on crisis prevention but also on crisis preparation (Coombs, 2019). Crisis prevention aims to prevent the transition to the crisis phase. In contrast, crisis preparation is about readiness for the occurrence of a crisis and measures that contribute to weathering it in the best possible way (Coombs, 2019; Drews, 2018).

2.2 The Role of Internal Stakeholders

A popular definition of internal crisis communication is "the communicative interaction among managers and employees, in a private or public organisation, before, during and after an organisational or societal crisis" (Johansen et al., 2012, p. 271). In crisis communication, there has long been a focus on external stakeholders in both academia and practice (Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Johansen et al., 2012). The neglect of internal stakeholders is to be viewed critically. After all, organisational members are among key stakeholders, as they are not only affected by crises, but without their involvement, effective crisis management is inconceivable (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). When internal stakeholders actively notice and

report weak signals of crises, organisations can initiate countermeasures in time (Heide, 2013).

Furthermore, stakeholders at every level within the organisation communicate with people outside their organisation. Thus, there is no rigid separation between the inside and the outside world of an organisation, and the boundaries between internal and external are blurred (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). Consequently, internal stakeholders are influenced by external factors and, conversely, have an external effect themselves.

They have a more complex psychological linkage with the organisation than external stakeholders, which Frandsen and Johansen (2011) characterise using four elements. The first element is the type of relationship to the organisation. Internal stakeholders have a legal, economic and formal relationship with the organisation through their employment contract, salary and role function. Secondly, they have various stakes towards the organisation, such as job security and degree of freedom. Thirdly, they identify with the organisation, as the profession is part of their personal identity. Fourthly, they are both senders and receivers of information. This element becomes central in internal crisis communication (Kim, 2018; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). Internal stakeholders, especially those without leadership responsibility, have too often been perceived as passive recipients in crisis communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). If they are perceived as active players, there will be more opportunities to be involved in the pre-crisis stage. Heide and Simonsson (2015) point out that internal stakeholders who act as whistle-blowers or dissenters within their organisations can share valuable information bottom-up.

Regarding internal stakeholders and their role in the pre-crisis phase, the academic literature often distinguishes between managers and employees (Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011; Zerfaß et al., 2018). It should be noted that these stakeholders are not homogeneous groups and can differ greatly in their tasks and interests (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Y. Lee & Kim, 2021). For example, management could simultaneously mean middle managers, top managers, and the board of directors – or just one of them. Advocates of public segmentation theory, therefore, use the term *internal publics* to better reflect the heterogeneity within a stakeholder group (Y. Lee, 2019). This thesis follows the majority of internal crisis communication researchers and continues to use the term *stakeholder* but acknowledges that there are a variety of attitudes within a stakeholder group. This paper uses the term manager for employees with leadership responsibilities, which includes middle managers. When referring exclusively to people in charge at the highest management level, this is made clear by using additions such as *upper* management.

Many times, it has been researched what role managers take in crises and what is expected in terms of their leadership style (e.g., Baran & Scott, 2010; Haddon et al., 2015). For instance, leadership is expected to act quickly in a crisis while simultaneously keeping employees informed (Haddon et al., 2015). Yet, Heide and Simonsson (2020) argue that research focused on top-down actions neglects the complexity of the relationship between managers and employees. Such a top-down approach corresponds with the modern tradition, which focuses on rationality and control. Typically, the focus is on the acute crisis phase, and crises are classified as solo, abnormal events triggered by external factors that are dealt with in a reactionary manner (Heide, 2013). In contrast, the postmodern tradition, which is favoured by social constructionists, concentrates on the perception and sensemaking of the stakeholders. According to the postmodern tradition, there are no standard solutions in crisis management, and employees are considered the most valuable resource (Heide, 2013). This thesis aligns itself with the tradition of postmodernism.

Moreover, Frandsen and Johansen (2017) argue that employees "often know more about what is going on than senior management" (p. 211). Their influence should not be underestimated because, as the Edelman trust barometer (2020) shows, employees are trusted more than CEOs. There is increasing research into how employee communication can be an advantage in the event of a crisis, for example, acting as advocates by defending the company's reputation on social media (Jin et al., 2020; Opitz et al., 2018). One of the prere-quisites for this is that companies invest in a favourable relationship with their employees in pre-crisis times (Kim, 2018; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). A survey of 449 employees from large-sized corporations in the United States finds that individuals' pre-crisis relationship signifi-cantly influences their crisis perceptions and leads them to become more publicly involved in crises (Y. Lee, 2019). Individuals with a high-quality relationship are most likely to actively speak out publicly as advocates for the company in a crisis. However, the author notes that these individuals are willing to publicise negative information when disappointed with their employer (Y. Lee, 2019). This again underlines the complexity of the psychological linkage of internal stakeholders to the organisation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

2.3 Internal Crisis Prevention

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, a piece of often-quoted advice in crisis communication is, "The best way to manage a crisis is to prevent one" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 408). Preventative measures include risk management, issues management, and

reputation management (Coombs, 2019). The methods overlap in some respects and complement each other (Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014).

2.3.1 Risk Management

Risk management concentrates on potential crisis triggers within an organisation (Coombs, 2019). Organisations want to use risk communication to anticipate possible crisis scenarios and raise awareness among relevant stakeholders (Drews, 2018; Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014). Risk communication aims to empower people to protect themselves from risks by providing them with all relevant information. Then, they can form their own opinions and act reflectively based on this knowledge and their preferences (Renn, 2009). For internal communication, this means educating managers and employees about risky behaviours and processes (Sax & Torp, 2015). They must learn not to cause crises themselves, for example, through inappropriate behaviour (Mazzei & Butera, 2021). A company-wide approach is adequate to build up risk awareness and understanding, as risks must be assessed across departments and addressed strategically (Sax & Torp, 2015).

While many aspects of crisis prevention are still under-researched, risk communication has been a well-known field of research for several years (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). For a long time, risk and crisis communication have been regarded as separate fields of research in academia. For about a decade now, communication scientists have increasingly considered them in an integrated way (Drews, 2018; Heath & O'Hair, 2009). Heath and O'Hair (2009) note that "any risk that is manifested can constitute a crisis" (p. 6), thereby describing the interplay between the two concepts. The renowned sociologist Beck (2007/2009) states, "Risk is *not* synonymous with catastrophe. Risk means the *anticipation* of the catastrophe. Risks concern the possibility of future occurrences and developments; they make present a state of the world that does not (yet) exist" (p. 9). The author argues that humanity nowadays lives in a risk society in which social life is fundamentally characterised by uncertainty (Beck, 2007/2009). Based on the work of Beck (2007/2009), Frandsen and Johansen (2017) argue that there is a new risk awareness in society, which is reflected at the organisational level in an "*anticipative risk behavior*" (p. 29). This, in turn, can be categorised as prevention. Moreover, the authors state that, in contrast to crisis management, risk management focuses solely on the pre-crisis phase (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

Risk management is an iterative process in which an objective or context is firstly defined. This is followed by a risk analysis consisting of risk identification and risk assessment. Then

there is risk treatment, in which risk modification measures are selected and implemented. Finally, in risk management planning, strategies or actions are concretely planned, and risk decision-making and implementation are performed (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

2.3.2 Issues Management

Issues can be defined as "(a) a public concern about the organization's decisions and operations that may or may not also involve (b) a point of conflict in opinions and judgements regarding those decisions and operations" (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 194). Often there is a public debate about them as a matter of concern in society before they are linked to a specific organisation (Cornelissen, 2020). Thus, issues management focuses on the environment in which an organisation operates concerning current social developments and issues that can lead to the outbreak of crises if not addressed (Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014).

Similar to risk management, issues management has been regarded as a distinct discipline with its own strategic scope (Jaques, 2007). While issues management and crisis management are not congruent, Jaques (2007) suggests viewing them as integrated, non-linear, interrelated constructs. For instance, failure to act on an issue can lead to the need for crisis management (Coombs, 2019). The transition from an issue to a crisis can be fluent (Cornelissen, 2020). As soon as an issue becomes a crisis, the organisation is no longer only required to take decisive but also immediate action (Cornelissen, 2020).

To prevent an issue from becoming a crisis, scholars stress the importance of proactive action (Lütgens, 2015; Röttger et al., 2018). The process of issues management can be divided into five iterative steps. Firstly, issues managers must identify issues as early as possible. Secondly, there is the issue analysis, in which a more detailed overview is acquired. Thirdly, a change strategy option is developed, which is, fourthly, implemented in an action program. Finally, the measures are evaluated (Jones & Chase, 1979). Strategic scanning and monitoring of issues play a crucial role in this process. Scanning detects issues, after which their development is monitored to check their status (Schwarz & Pforr, 2011).

The later the organisation becomes aware of the issue, the more difficult it is to influence its course (Lütgens, 2015; Röttger et al., 2018). Consequently, the crisis team tries to recognise warning signs as early as possible– when they are still so-called weak signals, and it is easier to take countermeasures (Coombs, 2019). Heide and Simonsson (2014) describe internal stakeholders in this context as "organisation's tentacles" (p. 139), who collect their impressions from the outside and bring them into the organisation. Since employees are close

to both the core business and external stakeholders, they are in an excellent position to detect weak signals (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). Zerfass et al. (2018) state that "many strategy shifts have been triggered by co-workers listening to weak signals in dynamic environments" (p. 491).

However, Taylor (2010) states that many organisations fail to detect early signs of crisis. A survey conducted by Deloitte (2018) among 523 crisis management, business continuity, and risk executives from 20 countries supports this claim. When asked what organisations would do differently in retrospect after a crisis, the most frequently mentioned point by 33 per cent of the participants is "improve detection and early warning systems" (p. 5). Recognising weak signals and drawing the conclusion that they pose a threat of some kind requires effort on the part of the individual organisation members (Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Vogus et al., 2014). Emotional ambivalence and prosocial motivation can facilitate these efforts (Vogus et al., 2014). It might be worthwhile for organisations to promote these skills among their staff in training.

2.3.3   *Reputation Management*

Reputation management is about the relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders. Organisations that have a positive reputation in the eyes of their stakeholders can benefit from the leap of faith that comes with it (Coombs, 2019; Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014). Researchers have observed a so-called *halo effect* several times. This refers to a positive pre-crisis reputation impacting perceptions during a crisis. The organisation enjoys the benefit of the doubt and has a greater chance of averting reputational damage in its crisis communication and management, as they have built a reputation in advance of being a trustworthy organisation (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Schwarz, 2012).

Wæraas and Dahle (2020) link internal reputation management to human resource management and employee voice. The analysis of data strategy documents and interviews from 25 large and medium-sized Norwegian organisations leads to the conclusion that internal reputation management is primarily people management (Wæraas & Dahle, 2020). Specifically, it is advised, "If employees are treated as potential brand saboteurs, they might behave as brand saboteurs. If they are treated as ambassadors, they might behave as ambassadors" (Wæraas & Dahle, 2020, p. 286). That illustrates again why the lines between internal and external stakeholders are blurred (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). If the organisation enjoys a good reputation and trust internally, the employees as

brand ambassadors can help increase the organisation's reputation externally. The organisational culture and leadership style are influential here, which is discussed in more detail in chapter 2.5.

2.4   Internal Crisis Preparation

When crisis prevention does not work as intended, it makes it all the more important that crisis preparation is done well. Coombs (2019) states that a crisis communication plan is probably the best-known means of crisis communication and is indispensable in preparation. It serves to ensure quick strategic action in a crisis, as there is increased time and decision-making pressure in a crisis (Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014). The prominence of crisis plans is underlined by a survey in Denmark among 465 private organisations and municipalities, which shows that 88 per cent have a crisis or contingency plan (Johansen et al., 2012). Of these, 85 per cent include internal dimensions of crisis management in the crisis plan (Johansen et al., 2012). Likewise, in the Deloitte survey (2018), 84 per cent of respondents say they have a crisis management plan in place. But this does not seem to be the case in all sectors and types of organisations. Other surveys show that in 75 German-speaking tourism organisations, only 16.2 per cent are prepared for a crisis with an action plan, training, et cetera (Hahn & Neuss, 2018), and out of 122 German interest groups, only 27 per cent have a crisis plan (Schwarz & Pforr, 2011).

It is important to remember that the existence of a plan does not automatically mean that it is implemented in the organisational processes (Drews, 2018; Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Interviews with 24 communication professionals from Sweden (Heide & Simonsson, 2014), and interviews with 12 experts from German public authorities (Drews, 2018), indicate a need for improvement. The same applies to crisis manuals, also known as handbooks. These should be seen as enablers rather than inflexible step-by-step instructions (Griffin, 2014).

In addition, the constitution of a crisis team and clarification of responsibilities should be an integral part of crisis preparation (Drews, 2018; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011). In concrete terms, this means that personal networks are established and used, directories and address lists are updated, management tasks are defined, and regular meetings within the team and the company board are held (Deloitte, 2018; Drews, 2018; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011). Board involvement strengthens crisis management. In the aforementioned survey by Deloitte (2018), 21 per cent of the companies with board participation in the crisis management plan state that

the number of crises has decreased within the last ten years. Without board participation, this figure is only two per cent.

Moreover, training for crisis situations in simulations is essential for preparation. It is a long-established practice in management and communication (Bland, 1995; Boin et al., 2004; Coombs, 2019; J. Lee et al., 2007; Veil, 2010), which is also reflected in the fact that such training is a common service provided by numerous risk consultancies and crisis communication consultancies (e.g., Deloitte, n.d.; Edelman, n.d.; Ernst & Young, 2018; FGS Global, n.d.; Kekst CNC, 2019; Marsh, n.d.; McKinsey, 2020). Such training should go beyond the communication department and include all those responsible for crises in the event of an emergency (Drews, 2018). Involving a large group of diverse people leads to having a bank of capable leaders in the event of a crisis (Griffin, 2014).

The survey by Deloitte (2018) shows a gap between feeling prepared and being prepared for crisis situations. While many respondents are confident in their ability to respond well to a crisis (out of 14 scenarios asked, the average was 78.3 per cent confidence), the actual simulation exercises carried out are considerably lower (25.7 per cent simulations on average). This is a matter of concern since simulations are vital for identifying and training struggles and enabling actors to respond more confidently in an actual situation (Drews, 2018). Other measures for comprehensive crisis preparation include crisis media training, as well as being prepared to set up dark sites (Coombs, 2019; Hahn & Neuss, 2018; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011).

2.5   Organisational Influences

Communicative interactions and processes influence and are influenced by the organisational context (Heide & Simonsson, 2015). Taylor (2010) states, "Internal organisational factors such as organisational climate, culture, resources, access to the dominant coalition, etc. are more influential in the final public relations output than an individual's skills as a communication expert" (p. 699). Hence, Communications can lead the way, but crisis management is cross-functional, and several departments must work together to make it successful (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Griffin, 2014). Besides Corporate Affairs, Human Resources, Legal, and Health, Safety, Security, and Environment are typically involved (Griffin, 2014).

Several factors have an impact on the effectiveness of prevention and preparation. It is a consensus in academia that the organisational culture is of great importance. There are two schools of thought in organisational culture: the pragmatist approach and the purist approach

(Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). The pragmatist approach assumes that culture is a variable in an organisation and influences other variables, such as performance (Fiol, 1991; Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). It follows that management can analyse culture and transform it if necessary (Fiol, 1991; Kunda, 2009; Sathe, 1983). The incentive for this can be, for example, to create a shared identity among organisation members or to increase employee commitment (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). The purist approach, in contrast, considers organisation and culture inseparable and describes culture as the root metaphor for understanding organisations (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). From this perspective, it is questioned whether culture can be manipulated by management or other actors to achieve certain goals (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019; Willmott, 1993). The assumption behind this is that culture is a social construction that all organisational members shape in daily life (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). The pragmatist approach research is more top-down oriented, while the purist approach research is classically more bottom-up (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). Willmott (1993) criticises that the discussions between pragmatists and purists are often narrowly focused. Moreover, research illustrates that the leadership style of managers can greatly impact the organisation (Chang & Lee, 2007; Sax & Torp, 2015), but at the same time, meaning-making without employees cannot reflect reality (Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Wæraas & Dahle, 2020). This underlines the importance of examining perspectives from both management and employees when studying internal crisis communication.

One culture academia considers desirable is the so-called *high-reliability culture*. It refers to a trusting organisation, where sensemaking and communication on the part of the organisation's members are integral (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). Not being afraid of making mistakes improves the chance of detecting weak signals early because potential problems are discussed sooner (Simonsson & Heide, 2018). Empirical findings – such as a survey of 593 CFOs and marketing managers from the top 500 Danish companies (Sax & Torp, 2015), a survey among 325 employees of an electricity distribution company in Nigeria (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019), and 32 interviews in German youth welfare offices (Schwarz et al., 2016) – underline that a participative leadership style enables employees to become critically involved and thus contributes to crisis prevention and preparation. However, creating an environment that can draw correct conclusions from ambiguous information is challenging, and sometimes organisational politics complicate matters (Coombs, 2019). Lee and Kim (2021) propose that companies conduct formalised and regular surveys to better understand employees' perceptions on diverse topics.

Furthermore, crisis resilience is a component of highly reliable organisations, as there is an awareness and expectation that crises can appear (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). In academia, there are two perspectives on resilience. The first classifies resilience only as part of the post-crisis phase and sees it as "the ability of organisational members to bounce back after the crisis has broken out" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011, p. 351). The second conceptualises resilience as the organisation's ability to be less susceptible to crises (Coombs, 2019; Koronis & Ponis, 2018; Schwarz et al., 2016), which means that it can also be understood as part of pre-crisis management. It is recognised that crises can make organisations and their employees more resilient (Kim, 2020). However, as mentioned in the introduction: After the crisis is before the crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Therefore, this thesis follows the latter school of thought and takes into account that resilience gained through a past crisis can lead to an organisation being less susceptible in the future.

A survey of 2,260 C-suit executives from 21 countries found that organisations with an established resilient culture are three times more likely to cope well with the disruptions from the 2020 Corona crisis than those without a resilient culture (Deloitte, 2021). Resilience can be learned (Britt et al., 2016), which is why Coombs (2019) suggests that employee resilience training should be a part of crisis preparation. Overall, resilience is not static but a continuous learning process (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). Zerfaß and Viertmann (2017) argue that crisis resilience is currently not sufficiently prioritised by many communicators but holds great potential to demonstrate the strategic value of communication within the organisation.

There is an ongoing scientific debate about "anticipation vs. resilience" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 63). The fundamental difference between the two approaches is that anticipation assumes that crises can be detected and thus proactively prevented or prepared for (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Resilience, contrastingly, focuses more on the unpredictability of crises. In this sense, making an organisation resilient means that it is agile enough to be able to take countermeasures in the event of a crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Organisations do not have to make an either-or decision between anticipation and resilience but can take valuable lessons from both approaches to equip themselves for different types of crises (Comfort et al., 2001).

Leadership plays an essential role in fostering an open communication climate (Mazzei & Butera, 2021). To bring about positive change, not only top management must be convinced of it. If middle and front-line managers are included, it will become much easier to implement it in the entire organisation (Dahlman & Heide, 2021). In addition, with a participative leadership style, employees are more motivated to address their concerns (Sax & Torp, 2015).

Leaders must be able to listen, detach themselves from their own way of thinking and be open to negative upward communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2020). This is facilitated by trusting relationships between managers and employees (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011). Research like this, which looks at top-down and bottom-up perspectives, thus fulfils the condition mentioned by Heide and Simonsson (2020) to understand manager-employee relationships in their complexity.

The company's communications department can foster these positive relationships by being responsible for creating and maintaining a strong organisational identity. This involves creating coherent, consistent messages using various communication channels for internal communication (Heide, 2021). Communicators should act as internal advisors and support management in this (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). To put this into practice, communication must have an appropriate status in the organisational structure (Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014) and be valued by the management (Wiedemann & Ries, 2014) – including personnel resources (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012). Additionally, Human Resources can help build an inclusive employee relations approach in which employees feel valued and treated fairly and consistently and are, therefore, more likely to assist in crisis management (Mazzei & Butera, 2021). Yet, Macnamara (2016) notes that sometimes communication faces barriers in the process when corporate management is resistant to communicative consultation. Furthermore, a survey of 6,486 employees and managers from ten large Swedish companies shows that communication is recognised as a function of strategic value (Falkheimer et al., 2017). However, most respondents do not understand what precisely the role of communication professionals is, with only 42 per cent stating that they do (Falkheimer et al., 2017).

As Jaques (2012) elaborates in a literature review of various studies that conduct in-depth interviews with CEOs and top executives, most executives acknowledge the need for a proactive crisis culture and rank upward communication as critical to success in crisis prevention. At the same time, the senior managers state that they do not always give crisis management the priority it deserves and that it sometimes receives too little attention in day-to-day business (Jaques, 2012). It will be interesting to see in the empirical part of this thesis if German crisis communication professionals share this point of view and what, in their experience, is effectively implemented in the pre-crisis phase.

3   Method

The aim of this section is to explain the methodological approach of the thesis. Interviews with 11 experts were conducted, which were analysed by thematic analysis. First, the research design is discussed in more detail, and the method is justified. After that, the sample and the sampling strategy are explained. This is followed by operationalisation, illustrating how the theoretical concepts were made observable. The concrete data collection and data analysis are discussed as well. A further subchapter explains why the work can be considered valid and reliable. Finally, compliance with ethical considerations is presented.

3.1   Research Design and Justification of Method

To answer the research question, the means of expert interviews were used. A qualitative approach is appropriate since the thesis aims at "discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships" (Babbie, 2021, p. 385) to find out how German crisis communication professionals involve internal stakeholders in pre-crisis management. Likewise, the sub-questions of how prevention and preparation can succeed, require an in-depth understanding of individual experiences that can only be achieved with qualitative research (Johnson, 2011).

More specifically, interviews are best suited to look beneath the surface of the crisis experiences of communication professionals as they allow for rich, in-depth data (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Expert interviews enable it to investigate comprehensive knowledge from various perspectives of different individuals working in the same industry – namely the communication industry (Johnson, 2011). It is thus made possible to understand complex, different experiences of communication professionals in pre-crisis communication with internal stakeholders. What distinguishes an expert is that they have an extraordinary wealth of knowledge on a particular topic, which cannot be found among regular participants (Dorussen et al., 2005). This is certainly applicable to crisis communication professionals.

The interviews were semi-structured. This approach strikes a good balance between consistency and the possibility of digging deeper so that the individual stories can unfold (Evans & Lewis, 2018; Kvale, 2007). At the same time, comparability was ensured, as all interviewees commented on the same research topics. Their individual experiences lead to different emphases and insights (Matthews & Ross, 2010), which increases the richness of the data.

3.2 Sample and Sampling Strategy

The units of analysis were 11 experts who worked as communication professionals in Germany and had an extensive experience in crisis communication. Non-probability sampling was used to find suitable interviewees, namely purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was predominant, as eight experts were recruited through this method. These methods were chosen to increase the researcher's control over the sample's representativeness (Babbie, 2021). Purposive sampling has the advantage that it allows influencing the sample composition (Sarstedt et al., 2018), therefore, enabling the researcher to collect the most promising, rich data within a small sample (Yin, 2016). Snowball sampling made it possible to facilitate access to additional experts (Babbie, 2021). Both the participating experts were asked about recommendations for further interviewees after their interview, and crisis communication experts who could not participate themselves recommended contacts from their network. In some respects, purposive sampling was done again after snowball sampling. For example, the researcher mainly followed up on recommendations concerning female experts, who were underrepresented at the beginning of the interview series. In the end, six men and five women participated in the interview.

On the one hand, the experts had to fulfil several criteria to be considered suitable candidates. On the other hand, they needed to represent different perspectives, so the sample could not be too homogeneous. In addition to gender, the criteria of professional experience with crisis, organisation size, and organisation industry were considered. A sample description can be found in Appendix A. Details are explained in the following.

To make statements about pre-crisis communication and communication management, experts naturally had to have adequate professional experience regarding crisis communication. Before participant recruitment began, the criterion of professional experience was set at a minimum of five years of professional experience, and the number of years of crisis communication experience was set at three. Furthermore, they all had to be currently working in the field, which ensured that the statements were timely.

The actual number of years of experience of the experts greatly exceeded the requirement – with one exception. An appropriate sample size is determined by the degree of saturation, that is, the extent to which no new information can be obtained from additional participants and the data becomes redundant (Guest et al., 2006). Most experts worked either in a general management function, for instance, as Head of Communications, or specialised in crisis communication, in which case internal communication had to be taken into account. After

approximately half of the interviews, it was determined that in order to achieve saturation, the perspective of someone who was primarily responsible for internal communications but still involved in crisis communication was needed. Through snowball sampling, contact was made with an expert who had two and a half years of professional experience but witnessed numerous crises within that time. Since the interviewee was considered to have great expertise by another expert and worked in a senior position with personnel responsibility, the original quantitative criterion of years of professional experience was reconsidered and deviated from in this individual case. On average, the number of professional years among the 11 experts was 22.68 ($SD = 9.83$) and 17.32 ($SD = 9.24$) years in crisis communication. This underlines the extensive expertise of the interviewees in crisis communication.

Other criteria concerned the organisation in which the experts worked. The research question and sub-questions refer to the German market. Not every organisation had their headquarters in Germany, but all fulfilled the criterion of operating in the country and having professional local communication. All of the experts' current employers were profit organisations. Some operated exclusively in Germany, while others did business on a multinational or global level.

Since the interviews explored differences between internal stakeholder groups, the organisations needed a certain number of employees in Germany. Thus, there was a focus on large enterprises, which are defined as organisations with over 250 employees (European Commission, n.d.). The number of employees in Germany from the experts' current organisations ranged from 4,500 to almost 100,000. Moreover, none of the experts worked in the same organisation, and attention was paid to variety in terms of industries. Various sectors were represented, from the chemical industry to retail to financial services, telecommunications, and others. In addition, experts with longer careers sometimes talked about previous jobs, which increased the data's richness.

3.3   Operationalisation

The concepts from the research question are *pre-crisis communication*, *pre-crisis management*, and *internal stakeholders*. The two sub-questions further differentiate between *prevention* and *preparation* in the pre-crisis phase. The concepts were operationalised in line with the theoretical framework, resulting in an interview guide, which can be found in Appendix B.

In structuring the interview, the suggestion of Johnson (2011) was followed. The conversations started with a few introductory questions before the actual topic was slowly approached. Questions about the attitude towards crisis communication and the definition of crisis enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the expert's perspective right from the start. This also built rapport, which was particularly advantageous for more sensitive questions later on (Legard et al., 2003).

Subsequently, the pre-crisis phase was addressed to determine its importance in practice. Then, in line with the two sub-questions, specific questions were asked respectively about preventive and preparatory measures. These questions did not yet distinguish between internal and external measures. After the experts talked in general terms about their pre-crisis experiences, they were asked to compare the roles of internal and external stakeholders in pre-crisis communication. At this point, the experts had already reflected on their work on pre-crisis communication. However, it needed to be placed in the larger context of the organisation, that is, in pre-crisis management. Accordingly, there were questions about interdepartmental collaboration.

After that, the focus was on the concept of internal stakeholders and their roles. It was differentiated whether and where differences lie in the approach to management and employees in pre-crisis communication. Among other things, this is useful to explore whether employees were seen as passive or active actors in crisis prevention and preparation. These questions already allowed conclusions to be drawn about the organisational culture and leadership style. Nevertheless, further questions were asked about it to gain more detailed insights based on the organisational influencing factors from chapter 2.5.

Furthermore, the interview guide (see Appendix B) contains some additional questions, which were only asked when the answer to the main question was not profound enough. Some of these resulted from the probing process of the guideline throughout the interview series, which qualitative researchers recommend (Johnson, 2011; Yin, 2016). Moreover, as already mentioned, the interviews were semi-structured. Thus, spontaneous follow-up questions were asked to probe and prompt data. Besides, the order of the questions was slightly adapted to the course of the conversation (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The interviews ended with a summary of the most important findings and gave the participants the opportunity for further remarks and questions.

3.4 Data Collection

Before the interviews, an informed consent form was completed to follow ethical guidelines and inform participants about the purpose of the study and confidentiality. The data collection of the 11 interviews took place between 18 March and 13 May 2022. The audio recordings were between 40 and 74 minutes long. The interviews themselves were slightly longer, as the experts were first greeted and then reminded of the consent form and audio recording agreement signed therein before the recording began. In a few cases, the interviews were interrupted, for instance, when an expert received an important phone call or had internet problems for a short time. In such cases, the researcher summarised the last state of the interview so that the conversation could continue seamlessly. These brief interruptions are not counted as part of the total length of the interview. The transcripts ranged from 5,000 to 11,200 words.

The interviews were conducted online using video software. When interviewing online, video conferencing is the most personal option, as the counterpart can see facial expressions and some gestures, and the interaction is synchronous (Irani, 2019). The programs Microsoft Teams and Zoom were chosen because the organisations where the experts worked used either one of them. Consideration was given to conducting in-person interviews since this is the most suitable method for assessing body language and building rapport (Irani, 2019). However, the video variant was preferred for three reasons. Firstly, the development of the pandemic situation in spring 2022 was difficult to assess. Secondly, the experts worked all over Germany, and the travel effort would have been very high. And thirdly, all experts had busy schedules, and an online interview was easier to arrange – and occasionally reschedule – than an on-site appointment. In one case, it was necessary to spontaneously switch to telephone instead of video software for technical reasons.

Handwritten notes were taken during the interview. This signalled not only attentive listening to the interviewee but also had other important reasons. For one, it improved the researcher's understanding of the interview as a social occasion in which questions and answers function in an interplay (Johnson, 2011). Besides, it helped with the data analysis, which is shown in the next chapter.

Data collection was limited to the spoken word. The language of the interviews was German. Facial expressions and tone of voice were not collected. Passages with irony and humour were nevertheless marked in the transcript so that the meaning of the words was

clear. Data processing was simplified with the help of the transcription software Sonix. The machine-generated transcripts were all manually edited and completed.

3.5   Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out inductively using thematic analysis. An analytical induction does not mean that theory is ignored before the interviews. On the contrary, as explained in chapter 3.3, the interview guide was based on themes from the literature research. Thematic analysis was chosen as the appropriate analytic method because it is ideally suited to investigate how individuals give meaning to their experience and how the context influences this experience (Evans & Lewis, 2018). At the same time, it can be used to identify not only similarities but also differences in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method can discover both implicit and explicit themes and allows for in-depth interpretation (Guest et al., 2012). Additionally, it offers enough flexibility to delve into the depth of the themes and simultaneously can deal with the complexity of the vast amount of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following the suggestion of Braun and Clarke (2006), six phases of thematic analysis were carried out. First, familiarisation with the data had to be achieved (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcription process was helpful for this purpose (Riessman, 1993). Moreover, the transcripts were read several times carefully, whereby initial ideas were noted for the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). On top of that, the handwritten notes from the interviews were taken into account to explore particularly important passages in the text (Johnson, 2011). After the familiarisation, the analysis software Atlas.ti was used to facilitate the process of coding and identifying themes.

The second step in the thematic analysis was to generate initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The entire data set was repeatedly systematically checked, and statements relevant to answering the research questions were given codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The resulting extensive list of codes was assessed in the third phase, and potential themes were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fourth, these themes were reviewed. This was done first in relation to the previously coded extracts and then in relation to the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity were taken into account (Patton, 1990). In the fifth phase, the themes were defined and named. Unlike Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion, a codebook was used instead of a thematic map. As the authors themselves note, this is a more detailed way of presenting the data (Braun & Clarke,

2006). The codebook proved helpful in reflecting on intermediate findings and clarifying the individual themes' differentiation. Lastly, the report's writing was understood as part of the analysis. In reporting, a final reflection on the data took place, in which particularly vivid examples were elaborated as direct quotations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the following chapter discusses, the procedure with these six phases enabled a valid analysis. Ultimately, four main themes and ten sub-themes were identified.

3.6   Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of the research are crucial for the significance of the results. There is a debate in the literature about whether validity should instead be called credibility to express that there is no objective reality for the investigated concepts (Babbie, 2021). This thesis continues to use the term *validity* and refers to the definition of Hammersly (1990), who states that validity means "the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers" (as cited in Silverman, 2011, p. 367).

The knowledge of the experts plays a central role in the validity of the information (Dorussen et al., 2005). In other words, how much expertise the experts have. As described in chapter 3.2, the purposive sampling method was, therefore, the most appropriate. Non-probability sampling is more susceptible to biases (Sarstedt et al., 2018). This was countered by the fact that snowballing did not only occur from one person to the next. Instead, different people were approached through purposive sampling, who then, in turn, initiated new contacts.

Before the first expert interview, two test interviews were conducted with a crisis consultant with seven years of experience on the job and a student with both practical and theoretical experience on the topic of crisis communication. This aimed to test whether the operationalisation was successful and whether everything was understandable for the interviewees. After these tests, minor adjustments were made to the interview guide, which improved the validity as well (Silverman, 2011). At the same time, it was a helpful exercise for the researcher to professionalise the interview process.

Constant comparison is another characteristic of the validity of the analysis and played a substantial role throughout the process. Since thematic analysis is an iterative process, the codes were repeatedly analysed until the content had been interpreted in great depth (Boeije, 2010). This can be illustrated in particular in the fourth phase, when the entire data set was

reread to check the previous themes for their fit to the set and to determine whether all meaningful statements were coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A high degree of reliability is characterised by the fact that research is replicable by others and still produces the same results (Silverman, 2011). However, Babbie (2021) points out that this concept is somewhat ephemeral, as the object of investigation in social research is constantly changing. It is conceivable that the research results would look different in a few years when practices have evolved. Nevertheless, the degree of reliability was increased by certain measures in this research.

The research process was structured and transparent (Guest et al., 2012). The explanations of the previous chapters, the verbatim transcripts, and the use of a codebook contribute to this. The interview was semi-structured, which makes it difficult to reproduce the results. Still, the guideline was followed relatively consistently throughout the interviews. An intercoder agreement was not a concern, as both data gathering and analysis were done by one researcher (Guest et al., 2012).

As the interviews were conducted in German, but the direct quotes were translated into English, the respective experts were asked to approve them. Many experts had mentioned this as a prerequisite for being quoted by their real names. This ensured that the translation did not unintentionally distort the meaning but correctly reflected the experts' experiences.

Most of the interviewees had long careers and management positions. Moreover, as communicators, they were practised in interview situations. Therefore, the researcher prepared for a possible imbalance of power. To have a respectful and deeper conversation, it is necessary to be well-informed and prepared (Kvale, 2007). For this reason, a closer look was taken at the biography of the interlocutor, and the theoretical research was conducted before the interviews. This made it possible to delve deeply into the interview subject matter.

Finally, researchers should reflect on their personal biases and try to detach themselves from them to arrive at the most objective results possible (Tracy, 2010). The experts are long-standing professionals in the researcher's field of interest. Hence, there was a risk of approaching them as role models. Awareness of the possible bias helped overcome this during data collection and analysis.

3.7   Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, an informed consent form was completed to follow ethical guidelines. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary

nature of their participation, their time commitment, audio recording, and confidentiality. For most participants, confidentiality was particularly important, and many agreed only on the condition of anonymity. This lead to the need to withhold information (Babbie, 2021). Therefore, the sample description in Appendix A contains only a selection of the sample criteria to prevent conclusions from being drawn about the identity of the anonymous experts. In addition, company names or names of persons were anonymised in the transcripts of the incognito participants. Even for interviewees who agreed to participate with their real names, it happened at times that specific examples were told in confidence. Such examples were included in the analysis during coding but not used as direct quotes. The quote approval mentioned above is also part of the ethical considerations, as it underlines the voluntary nature of participation and protection of sensitive data.

4   Results

This chapter presents the results of the analysis from the 11 expert interviews. It demonstrates how German crisis communication professionals approach the involvement of internal stakeholders in pre-crisis communication management and which aspects are essential for the success of crisis prevention and crisis preparation in their organisations. In the course of the analysis, it became clear that the main themes of *coordination and institutionalisation* and *culture* are dominant. Nonetheless, both the *professionalisation of communication* and the application of concrete *pre-crisis communication practices* are very influential on pre-crisis management's success as well. A coding scheme with an overview of the four main themes, ten sub-themes and 29 codes can be found in Appendix C.

4.1   Coordination and Institutionalisation

The coordination and institutionalisation of pre-crisis management within the organisation ensures a strategic approach. As a prerequisite, prioritisation of the pre-crisis phase is needed, which is the will to recognise and implement preventive and preparatory crisis management. Besides, functioning processes and structures are crucial to proceed in a coordinated manner. Finally, implementation within the organisational structure requires interdepartmental cooperation, as pre-crisis management is not a solo effort.

4.1.1   Prioritisation of Pre-Crisis Phase

There is unanimity among the experts interviewed that the pre-crisis phase is essential for successful crisis management and crisis communication to protect the reputation and prevent damage to the organisation and its stakeholders. This is in line with previous literature (Heide, 2021; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). Nevertheless, this aspiration does not always translate into reality. Four of 11 experts stated that crisis communication measures are repeatedly neglected due to the occupation of day-to-day tasks. The statement in Jaques' (2012) literature comparison that executives sometimes deprioritise pre-crisis management in favour of everyday tasks is thus reflected in the communication department, too. The rest of the experts were satisfied with the prioritisation of the pre-crisis phase in their organisation. However, sometimes the communication team attached great importance to pre-crisis communication

exercises while parts of the management disregarded them. This is further discussed in chapter 4.2.3 on leadership.

There were different approaches for the pre-crisis phase among the experts. Opinions differed particularly on the topic of crisis prevention. Many experts were critical of crisis prevention and preferably referred to the idea of crisis mitigation. This is in line with Coombs' (2019) argumentation, who states that some crises cannot be prevented but rather mitigated. The experts felt that sometimes neither Communications nor other parts of the organisation have the power to influence whether crises occur or not. As Interviewee 7, Communications and Marketing Director, said, "One has to be aware of the fact that your own business model, your own team in the broadest sense, are vulnerable. … No matter how hard you try, no matter how compliant you are." A frequently mentioned reason for this was external influences that cannot always be predicted. This corresponds to Beck's (2007/2009) description of a risk society characterised by uncertainty. The experts applied risk and issues management measures to reduce this uncertainty, as is elaborated in chapter 4.4.1.

A few interviewees stated that sometimes operational crises come too late to the attention of management and communication, and then only damage limitation could be done. In contrast, other experts classified precisely these crises as preventable. The latter reflects the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), according to which there are indeed crises that can be prevented by appropriate behaviour. For example, Interviewee 4, Head of Corporate Press and Internal Communications, noted, "When it comes to operational crises – for example, a building is on fire with people inside – then, of course, the crisis is preventable by making sure that fire protection is maintained." The quote also illustrates that operational business units have to take responsibility for crisis management, too. The matter of primary responsibility in pre-crisis management and the cooperation between the departments is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.1.3. How communication aims to increase crisis awareness in the organisation is debated in chapter 4.2.2.

There was a broad consensus among the experts that preparation is vital. It can be illustrated in the quote by Alexander Leinhos, Director Corporate Communications at Vodafone, "If you want peace, prepare for war. The same is true for crises." The speed at which information and events unfold in a crisis was identified as the main reason why crisis preparation is necessary. For many experts, preparation was more in focus than prevention. This may result from the previously mentioned belief that every organisation can be affected by a crisis sooner or later. In this matter, too, practice and academia overlap. However, the

literature does not conclude that preparation is preferable to prevention but underlines the impact of both (Coombs, 2019; Drews, 2018; Griffin, 2014; Jaques, 2013, 2016).

There were different views on how to define the transition from the pre-crisis phase to the crisis phase. Klaus Treichel, former Head of Corporate Communications at ABB and now Corporate Communications Consultant, said, "Of course, you have criteria in advance, and then it depends on declaring a situation a crisis." In contrast, Interviewee 7 stated, "What is a special situation, what is a crisis? For example, we do not have a very rigid definition now, but I think the scope is decisive." Interviewees also reported that, from a communications point of view, it is often not expedient to determine an exact point in time from the pre-crisis phase to the crisis phase. Timo Krupp, Head of Media Relations at Currenta, stressed, "I think anyone who waits [in a critical situation] to see whether something is still an issue or a crisis is already making the first mistake. Because in the end, it is all about being prepared in the best possible way." This underlines the interrelatedness of the aforementioned research fields of risk communication, issue communication, and crisis communication (Coombs, 2019; Heath & O'Hair, 2009; Jaques, 2007).

It became apparent that different organisations with different business models have different needs in pre-crisis management. For example, the chemical industry must take other precautions for operational reasons than those needed in the retail sector. How the type of organisation affects crisis awareness is further elaborated in chapter 4.2.2. As the transition from the pre-crisis phase to the crisis phase can be fluid, the importance of early action was underlined. Lara Flemming, Senior Vice President Corporate Communications and Marketing at EOS Group, advised going into crisis mode rather sooner than later:

Where does crisis management start, and where does it end? That is not so easy to define, I would say. But in the past, I think it was more the case that we first thought: We should better be extra careful now and then analyse whether it really is a crisis. And then maybe downsize or actually say, "Put more energy and capacity into this topic."

4.1.2 Processes and Structures

There is a need for crisis management to be effectively embedded in the organisation (Drews, 2018; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011), not only in the communication department. All experts underlined the priority of having well-functioning processes and structures. For many, it was more important for processes to run smoothly than for concrete prevention or

preparation measures to be perfectly implemented. Nevertheless, establishing certain practices is also part of successful internal crisis management, which is illustrated in more detail in chapter 4.4.

Systematic procedures play a decisive role. Expert Klaus Treichel noted, "In a crisis, you simply have to have procedures. And they have to run smoothly; they have to work. You do not have time to start with Adam and Eve and set up a procedure." Speed of response in a crisis is crucial to success, and good pre-crisis management enables a faster reaction (Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014). As most experts pointed out, the implementation and frictionless handling of procedures are essential to achieving this speed.

That is related to having clear responsibilities. The experts stressed that procedures should be known, and there must be skilled people who carry them out properly. That is true for interdepartmental cooperation (see 4.1.3) and work within departments. In the case of the communication department, it directly impacts its communicative capabilities (see 4.3.2). Expert Martin Frommhold, Division Manager Corporate Communications at OTTO (GmbH & Co KG), stated:

> It makes sense to have clear structures; people who know what to do in any situation and which channels to use. If possible, they should be able to fall back on patterns that they cultivate daily. And above all, they should know: I have a certain amount of freedom.

This statement illustrates that responsibility is not only about allocating tasks but also about having confidence in the respective actors to complete them satisfactorily. The team is thus characterised as reliable (Simonsson & Heide, 2018), which is further discussed in the chapters on trust and appreciation (see 4.2.1), and leadership (see 4.2.3).

Four experts mentioned the need for a certain degree of agility in processes and structures. This leaves room to react quickly to abrupt, unanticipated developments. One interviewee stated that, to a certain degree, an agile team could sometimes compensate for the lack of predefined procedures:

> This company is very agile and quickly appoints people who have to come to the table. And they are then empowered to act or make the decisions. This is another prime example of the crisis team being formed as late as during the crisis phase – out of necessity. (Interviewee 9, Internal Communications Officer)

However, the expert felt that the situation could be improved and that the crisis team performed below its capabilities when it solely had to rely on agility. Agility is valuable in crisis management, but clear procedures and responsibilities are not to be neglected. Consequently, there has to be a good balance between them. Finding this balance has to do with experience and mindset. These two aspects are discussed in more detail in chapter 4.3.2.

4.1.3   Interdepartmental Cooperation

Crisis management cannot be handled by one department alone (Griffin, 2014). Most of the expert's organisations had an official interdepartmental crisis team. In cases when there was no such team, there was still regular teamwork across different departments. This crisis team needs decision-making power in crisis situations. Therefore, every expert mentioned that upper management must participate in crisis management. The importance of management being actively involved is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.2.3 on leadership.

Furthermore, the departments Legal and Corporate Security are important components of the crisis teams and were mentioned by six interviewees, respectively. Even though the importance of the role of Human Resources appears regularly in the literature in connection with internal crisis communication (Griffin, 2014; Mazzei & Butera, 2021; Wæraas & Dahle, 2020), this function was only explicitly mentioned by three experts. Most of the interviewees were very satisfied with the interdepartmental cooperation. For example, Annette Siragusano, Global Head of Content Strategy and Cross Channel Campaign Management at Engel & Völkers, said, "I find it extremely constructive. Everyone contributes their expertise, and you are also able to make decisions very quickly."

However, there are differences regarding who leads the crisis team. Naturally, in the literature on crisis communication, the communications department is described as an important, often leading function (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Griffin, 2014). Interviewee 7 stated, "Communications sets the pace. Definitely. And completely clear to me, always in cooperation with the CEO." In contrast, Martin Büllesbach, Head of Staff Unit Crisis Communications at Clariant, pointed out:

> ESHA is short for Environment, Safety, Health & Affairs at Clariant. This department has overall responsibility in the event of a crisis, meaning that all activities are coordinated there. Communication is a central component of these activities, so the Crisis

Communications Staff Unit advises and supports ESHA in all communication-related issues in the event of a crisis.

These differences are not only linked to the role of communication within the organisation (see 4.3.1), but as mentioned in chapter 4.1.1, different organisations have different needs in crisis management. In any case, the experts agree that communication must do its best to amplify crisis management, which can sometimes mean urging other departments to take action.

Moreover, relationship management facilitates pre-crisis management. Interpersonal networks within the organisation enable crisis communication professionals to obtain relevant information for internal pre-crisis management early, for instance, to detect warning signals (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Many experts emphasised that they can only be successful in their work and internal crisis communication by building these relationships. Such a network needs to be cultivated:

> As a public relations worker, I am convinced that you simply must have informants everywhere who can give you a bit of a heads-up if needed. … If necessary, we run after our colleagues to make clear, "It is important that we are in contact with each other. It is important what you know. And it is particularly important that you tell me what you know." (Martin Frommhold)

Trust plays a central role in building a network. The following chapter 4.2.1 illustrates why trust should not only exist between communication professionals and internal stakeholders but is a critical success factor for crisis management in the whole organisation.

4.2 Culture

In the course of the interviews, it was consistently noted that aspects of organisational culture have a substantial influence on internal pre-crisis management. Many characteristics of the previously described high-reliability culture (Heide & Simonsson, 2020) are reflected in this main theme. This includes trust and appreciation between internal stakeholders, crisis awareness in the organisation as a whole, and the ability of management to lead.

4.2.1 Trust and Appreciation

Trust and appreciation between the individuals in the organisation are an integral part of the success of crisis management. Something very present in the academic literature is that internal communication was neglected for a long time in crisis communication, and especially employees were overlooked as transmitters of warning signs (Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Johansen et al., 2012; Taylor, 2010). However, the interviews reflected a clear consensus that employees are key stakeholders. As Lara Flemming put it:

> The crisis determines the most important stakeholders. … But I think the internal target group, which is the employees, is always a very relevant one. Sometimes they are forgotten a little bit. But I think that was a mistake that used to happen more often in the past than it does today.

Moreover, four experts pointed out that the strict distinction between internal and external is no longer adequate and of no avail for crisis communication, in line with Frandsen and Johansen (2017). These experts advocate reflecting this in the departmental structure by merging internal and external communication.

For all experts, executive management and managers in key positions were decisive sources of information in pre-crisis management. Yet, nine of 11 experts emphasised that employees must be engaged, too. Interviewee 7 explained:

> Internally, I would not want to distinguish which group of employees is more important or less important. I would hope we would take it equally seriously if someone came to us with a concern. However, the probability that a potentially critical issue relevant to the entire company or a large part of the company will strike someone from management is simply higher …

For employees to be actively involved in pre-crisis management, not only do communicators need to understand their value, but management also needs to trust employees. This trust is characterised by a certain degree of personal responsibility and the will to listen to the employees (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011). This is related to leadership style, as explained in more detail in 4.2.3.

Communication can help management to foster mutual trust (Heide, 2021). Lara Flemming elaborated:

I believe what good communication creates is trust. And I think what good communication creates is identification with my company where I work. And if I identify myself and am not just a work nomad who does not really care to whom I sell my skills, then I naturally have a bond with my company, a higher level of attention, and I want the company to do well too.

The experts considered transparency and authenticity in communication essential elements in this process. Many promoted the idea that information is not only prepared top-down, but dialogue is desired, and an effort is made to explain things to employees. Thus, employees were not seen as passive recipients within the organisation, but two-way communication was a priority – as is advocated in research (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Kim, 2018; Mazzei & Butera, 2021).

For crisis prevention, in particular, employees must speak up when they detect warning signs of crises. In many organisations, this bottom-up communication is actively encouraged, for example, through a dialogue-oriented intranet or other formats. This can be linked to reputation management, which is further discussed in chapter 4.4.1. However, many interviewees doubt whether this trust from employees to management exists across all hierarchical levels. Martin Frommhold noted, "Even the board does not always receive all critical issues. On the contrary. Sometimes the board members are the last to know anything. Also, because many companies like to keep problems and difficulties under wraps for a while." Some experts stated that sometimes employees feel more comfortable confiding in communication professionals than speaking to the board. Hence, communication can act as a mediator. As previously stated, it helps immensely when the communicators are already well networked internally themselves (see 4.1.3). How management can influence a climate of trust is explained in more detail in chapter 4.2.3.

4.2.2 Crisis Awareness

As discussed in the prioritisation of the pre-crisis phase (see 4.1.1), the majority of crisis communication experts believed that no organisation is immune to crisis. For an organisation to have better crisis management, not only do communicators and managers need to be

conscious of it, but crisis awareness should be embedded in the culture. This stimulates behaviour that is less likely to provoke crises and more likely to overcome them quicker and more efficiently. In the academic literature, a distinction is made between anticipation and resilience (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Concerning anticipation, the experts distinguish between the responsibility of management and employees. It is the task of management to have an overview of what is happening in the organisation. Communication should support them with risk and issue management (see 4.4.1) and management consulting (see 4.2.3). Individual employees, however, cannot be expected to have such foresight. Nonetheless, they should pay attention to their area and behaviour. Therefore, sensitisation to crisis-causing behaviour is needed. A statement from Interviewee 7 illustrates this, "I do not believe that everyone needs to fully understand in their daily work, for example, what has the potential for a crisis. But I do believe that specific behavioural guidelines can be provided."

The main focus is educating people on crisis-provoking behaviour and detecting warning signs. Rules and guidelines can be helpful here, for instance, social media guidelines or information and training from Compliance and IT. That does not imply that employees are not trusted (see 4.2.1) but rather that understanding is increased through transparent explanations.

Many experts described it as challenging to increase crisis awareness in everyday business, "Crisis should never be just a side issue. Nevertheless, a crisis does not happen every day" (Annette Siragusano). To increase sensitisation, some organisations have established regular formats. For example, Klaus Treichel described the "Safety Moment":

> There was never a meeting where the first item on the agenda was not something about security. That helps enormously. It was at the beginning of every meeting. And it does not always have to do with a crisis. Sometimes it is simply a matter of pointing out where the meeting places are when … the building has to be evacuated. At some point, every staff member is engaged with this.

The subject of resilience is mentioned considerably less in the interviews compared to anticipation and sensitisation. This confirms Zerfaß and Viertmann's (2017) statements that crisis resilience is not yet exploited to its full potential by communicators. Some sectors were more committed to being less susceptible to crises than others. Martin Büllesbach said, "The chemical industry certainly has a leading position in occupational safety compared to other sectors. The topic of safety is integrated into the employee's daily work and is an essential

part of the corporate culture." Timo Krupp pointed out that there is always room for improvement:

> If someone bottles mineral water, you can also have a serious, fatal accident. But if a pallet of mineral water tips over, that is different from a pallet of hydrochloric acid. … I have not met any other industry where this [crisis prevention] has become part of the DNA in so many places and where people are still not satisfied and constantly try to improve as in the chemical industry.

As remarked in the previous literature, resilience can be learnt and trained (Coombs, 2019). Especially crisis-prone sectors seem to have already recognised the importance of reacting agilely in the event of a crisis. The chemical industry is a vivid example of how crisis sensitisation and resilience can synergise (Comfort et al., 2001). Additionally, it illustrates the interplay of culture with coordination and institutionalisation (see 4.1).

4.2.3   Leadership

In terms of culture, managers need to become leaders. As leaders, they are role models who embody the organisation's values. Annette Siragusano underlined, "Culture is an issue where every individual can contribute. And I believe that culture must also be lived and exemplified." As indicated in chapter 4.1.1, it became evident in the interviews that the prioritisation of the pre-crisis phase on the part of management is decisive for the success or failure of pre-crisis management. The experts unanimously stated that crisis management must be declared a top priority by the CEO and other executives, "I think a crisis is always a board issue, especially a CEO issue. In a crisis situation, you need different lines of defence. Therefore, the CEO will always have a special role in situations like this" (Annette Siragusano).

Moreover, senior management needs exercises to perform at their best when a crisis occurs. Therefore, the management should be willing to take part in preparatory measures. The advantages of participating in concrete practices such as simulations are discussed in more detail in chapter 4.4.2. Most experts believed that their top managers knew the importance of pre-crisis communication and management. However, actively involving them in practice could sometimes prove challenging, as Christian Maertin, Head of Corporate Communications and Media Relations at Bayer, said:

We could definitely practise that a bit more. But it also has to do with the fact that the board is always involved in such situations. … You have to do that [simulations] for a few hours. Thus, we cannot involve the board for just half an hour, but ideally, it should even run for a day. Try to get several board members to simultaneously do it for a whole day.

This reinforces Jaque's (2012) claim that executives occasionally neglect pre-crisis management in their day-to-day business. However, involved management is not only charac-terised by involvement at the highest level. Not every employee has direct contact with top management, so middle and front-line managers are crucial in conveying information through the hierarchies of organisations (Dahlman & Heide, 2021). These may be, for example, the specialists mentioned above in critical positions in other departments (see 4.1.3). As chapter 4.2.1 illustrates, establishing a trusting relationship between the hierarchical levels in the pre-crisis phase is crucial for warning signals to be passed on in time to decision-makers.

Last but not least, the error culture characterises good leadership. Criticism should be addressed openly, and mistakes should be considered learning opportunities, which improves mutual trust between employees and management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011). The experts saw this as a vital prerequisite for crisis prevention – or at least mitigation (see 4.1.1). If mistakes and criticism are not addressed, there will be no learning from them. Klaus Treichel underlined, "There has to be a certain openness to talk about problems and how to tackle them, how to try to solve them." It became clear that the participative leadership style referred to in the literature (Sax & Torp, 2015) was also favoured by the experts in the field. By communicating appropriate messages internally, communication can support leadership (Heide, 2021). Management consulting is another way in which communication can positively impact pre-crisis management, which is discussed in more detail in the following chapter 4.3.1.

4.3   Professionalisation of Communication

The professionalisation of communication concerns the fact that communication as a function must be empowered to deliver good work concerning internal crisis communication. Firstly, this must be reflected in the organisational structure. Secondly, the department itself must meet the requirements for a good crisis communication team.

4.3.1 Role within the Organisation

The way the communication department is embedded within the organisation as a strategic function is decisive. For communication professionals to properly carry out their work in internal crisis communication, they need a certain level of authority and status within the organisational structure (Falkheimer et al., 2017; Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014). The influence within the organisation must be already anchored in the pre-crisis phase. As Christian Maertin emphasised, "If the importance of communication is not really recognised, then it is too late in the crisis anyway. Because then it will not emerge, as everything has to come together." The experts agreed that they could only do their job well if communication is recognised as a strategic function in the organisation. Timo Krupp had experienced what it is like when this is not the case:

> … I do not run into walls whenever I ask questions. I know that from other jobs I had had before when there was the "nice" sentence, "I cannot tell you that, it is not for the public." There is no such thing here. It simply does not happen. It is clear that if Communications has a question, it must be answered.

Interviewee 4 agreed that the strategic anchoring of communication in the organisation is highly relevant and noted that it could be earned, "The more successful communication is, the more important it naturally becomes. It is a self-reinforcing system." This demonstrates a connection to the communication professionals' communicative capabilities (see 4.3.2).

Moreover, management consulting was mentioned as a means to influence pre-crisis management on the part of communication positively. This is consistent with the findings from the previous chapter 4.2.3, where the importance of good leadership is highlighted. The majority of the experts described the relationship between executive management and communication as a decisive factor. As Christian Maertin put it, "Does a board want to be advised by its communications department? Or does it – to say it somewhat flippantly – just see communication as the small team placed somewhere between Marketing and the corporate archive?" A close relationship with upper management is considered helpful in academic literature as well, and communicators are referred to as internal advisors (Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Wiedemann & Ries, 2014). Many experts thought that certain proximity and regular contact points are prerequisites for it. Specifically, participation in board meetings and jour fixes were given as examples. Furthermore, consulting the senior management was mentioned

as a way of averting preventable crises by influencing decisions that affect the reputation of the company:

> One way [to prevent crises] is by being close to the board and sitting in when decisions are made. ... If you manage to sensitise people relatively early on in the chain of catastrophes through a clear vote, ideally also a large share of the vote, and perhaps dissuade them from nonsense, who may only have the business on their minds. ... then you will probably prevent 80 to 90 per cent of what could happen out there through human errors or crises triggered by wrong decisions from the very top. (Alexander Leinhos)

Overall, most interviewees were satisfied with their connection to top management. However, a few experts noted that executives were sometimes resistant to consultation, which corresponds to the observations of Macnamara (2016). Although this was only evident in a few cases, it can be viewed critically. As previously stated in chapter 4.2.3, the willingness of managers to play an active role in pre-crisis communication and give space for critical comments is essential to successful pre-crisis management.

4.3.2   Communicative Capabilities

According to Taylor (2010), the individual abilities of communication professionals are less critical for the public relations output than organisational factors. Nevertheless, it was evident throughout the interviews that the capabilities of the communication department and its members do influence the success or failure of internal crisis communication. Herein, the concrete skills and experiences of the team members play an essential role. After all, crisis communication is not an easy discipline, as several experts pointed out. For example, Christian Maertin:

> Do we succeed in preventing massive damage to the company's reputation and thus the company itself and its operational activities? Nowhere is the impact of communication as great as in crisis communication. And that is why it is rightly called the supreme discipline in communication.

Thus, academia and practice agree on the importance and complexity of crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Fearn-Banks, 2016; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021).

As previously explained, crisis management requires teamwork (see 4.1.3). This applies to crisis communication as well. Accordingly, there was agreement among the interviewees that specialists are needed in the communication team for different tasks and channels, which require specific skills. Martin Frommhold elaborated:

> You simply need good communicators who know what they are doing even under pressure, under stress. And you can only do that when you do a good job in your everyday business – when you know your craft. That is, I believe, the best training.

What also emerges from this statement is that some experts saw daily business as training. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.4.2 on crisis preparation. Another aspect that came up in the interviews is that colleagues who have been through actual crisis situations develop a sense of critical situations, which increases their crisis awareness. As discussed in chapter 4.2.2, this is a valuable asset.

Moreover, experience has a positive effect on the mindset. The experts agreed that acting calm and collected is crucial for success in a crisis. Interviewee 7 stated, "You have to assess things as they come, but keep your cool. If you go into crisis mode yourself, I do not think you gain anything." Therefore, precautions must already be taken in the pre-crisis phase. Timo Krupp stressed, "If you have the basic convictions, you do not need to be afraid of communication anymore because you will always find the right words out of this." Thus, in order to be well prepared, they must feel well prepared, too. This overlaps with the concept of resilience (Britt et al., 2016; Koronis & Ponis, 2018), as illustrated in chapter 4.2.2.

Feeling ready for an imminent crisis is not only vital for the head of the team but also all other team members. As Annette Siragusano noted:

> The crisis is not waiting for us. So, in the end, a team has to be able to deal with such situations on its own. And that is why you have to practise it, and that is why you have to trust them.

The experts thought crisis training helps the whole team adopt the right mindset and increase trust in their abilities. Crisis training and other preparatory measures are elaborated in chapter 4.4.2.

Four experts mentioned the importance of resources for the communicative capacities of the team. They agreed that without enough capacity within the department, it becomes tough

to ensure that pre-crisis communication gets the attention it deserves. Interviewee 9 illustrated, "One crisis follows the next. ... There are no resting phases where one says, 'Let us block off two days and sit down in peace and quiet and think about a concept.' There is no capacity left for that." This argumentation can also be found in previous studies (e.g., Buchholz & Knorre, 2012). Nonetheless, the analysis has shown that other factors also influence the pre-crisis phase's prioritisation, such as a busy day-to-day schedule, as discussed earlier (see 4.1.1).

4.4 Pre-Crisis Communication Practices

Dealing with crisis prevention and preparation at the organisational level is crucial, as pointed out in previous chapters. Nevertheless, the communications department should embed concrete pre-crisis communication practices within the organisation. This concerns preventative and preparatory actions.

4.4.1 Crisis Prevention

As aforementioned, in the prioritisation of the pre-crisis phase, experts had different views on the distinction between preventable crises and crisis mitigation (see 4.1.1). When it comes to concrete practices, however, it became apparent that the same measures were brought up despite different ways of thinking. For this reason – and to illustrate the overlap with the theoretical framework in chapter 2.3 – the term *crisis prevention* was chosen for this section.

A prevalent aspect of prevention is risk and issues management. Unlike in the literature (e.g., Beck, 2007/2009; Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014; Wiedemann & Ries, 2014), many interviewees did not use the terms *risk* and *issue* selectively. It nevertheless became clear that the experts need to achieve the earliest possible identification of issue warning signs or early risk identification. Scenario development played a central role in six of the 11 expert interviews. For this, information is collected from both internal and external sources to have the best possible overview of what is happening inside the organisation, the organisational environment, and social developments. Interviewee 4 pointed out, "You have to know the correlations. … You have to understand how the individual elements fit together. And the most important and the best thing for crisis management is simply to be well informed." These scenarios are not only relevant for prevention but also for preparation, as is explained in the following chapter 4.4.2.

An often-mentioned prerequisite for minimising the threat from risks and issues was to be as well informed as possible. In particular, many experts made a point of getting all the information internally from their colleagues in other departments before a critical media enquiry arose. In these situations, the crisis communication professionals often escalated information to management and initiated appropriate procedures (see 4.1.2). In some cases, the experts decided to proactively communicate a statement on a risk or issue early on. This approach of early proactive communication is also mentioned in academia as a way to prevent an issue from developing into a crisis (Lütgens, 2015; Röttger et al., 2018).

Two experts stated that establishing a newsroom structure in their department has facilitated the identification of risks and issues. That links to chapter 4.1.2, which addresses the importance of effective processes and structures. Additionally, most experts mentioned standard practices of external crisis communication, such as social media monitoring and contact with journalists. After chapter 4.2.1 already stressed the importance of holistically looking at internal and external communication, it becomes clear again that both internal and external measures are needed to get a complete picture of crisis communication. That reflects previous literature (Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Johansen et al., 2012).

Besides risk and issues management, the interviewees mentioned the third measure of crisis prevention from the literature, namely reputation management. The opinion in academia that a good reputation can have a protective effect in the event of a crisis (Coombs, 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Schwarz, 2012) is reflected in the experts' statements. For example, Interviewee 4 said, "Basically, good communication management is the best crisis management." In this context, many experts mentioned standard internal communication measures such as town halls or Q&As to influence the climate within their organisations. This strongly relates to previously discussed aspects of the organisational culture (see 4.2).

Another aspect of reputation management in internal crisis communication is that employees can help improve the organisation's reputation externally. The concept of brand ambassadors discussed by Wæraas and Dahle (2020) found resonance among experts. Accordingly, the organisation must have a good internal reputation, and the internal stakeholders must feel a certain sense of belonging. Annette Siragusano said:

> For example, if I have built up a network of internal influencers ... then, of course, I also have people who can support us during a crisis. ... Which does not mean that every employee should do crisis communication on social media. That is not what I mean. But

in their environment, for example, with their friends who approach them, it helps when everyone acts with "one voice".

At the same time, internal stakeholders should be guided in their external communication, for example, through appropriate publicity guidelines, as five experts noted.

4.4.2   Crisis Preparation

Readiness is crucial for successful crisis management (Coombs, 2019; Drews, 2018), which is reinforced by the statement of many experts that every organisation experiences crises sooner or later (see 4.1.1). Therefore, there must be realistic, regular crisis simulations and training. Lara Flemming elaborated:

> It is always like that: Everything you do not practise, you forget. And then a crisis comes around the corner, and you say, "Crisis manual or not, I just do not know what to do." Therefore, these things are practised on a regular basis in our company.

Different skills should be trained through different types of training, for example, media training or various scenarios. The interviewees advised practising interdepartmental cooperation with the complete crisis team, including the management beyond one's own department (see 4.1.3).

The survey by Deloitte (2018) indicates that the feeling of being prepared is more common among crisis managers and risk executives than actual preparation for various scenarios through simulations. In contrast, however, most interviewees emphasised that only through regular exercises does a team or an organisation feel prepared for a crisis. This mindset, in turn, has a positive effect on the actual communicative capabilities, as discussed previously (see 4.3.2).

Some interviews reflected that training only helps up to a certain point. One reason was that even realistic training does not reflect a real situation. Annette Siragusano reported a solution to get around this problem, which she conducted in her previous job as Head of Corporate Communication at Comdirect. The expert organised a simulation, but without informing the team in advance:

And, of course, I was already sitting in the room next to them. The first moment was really surprising and perhaps also shocking for the team. Because no one had thought of a situation like this that morning. I joined them a little later, of course. But the crisis was already going on. It was really interesting seeing how everyone dealt with this situation. And it helped us a lot. The next time, we as a team were used to it. It is important to have in your mind that it is not like that: "Oh, next Thursday we will have a crisis exercise." Because de facto, it is like this in life: I cannot plan a crisis, it just happens. And therefore, I have to be prepared.

It was consensus that even the most experienced crisis managers can profit from concrete training sessions. In addition, a few experts mentioned training on the job as a method of crisis preparation. In these cases, the focus is particularly on the everyday development of communicative capabilities, as previously addressed in chapter 4.3.2. Interviewee 4 promoted this approach:

But I have come to the conclusion that the best is simply doing the job. Taking risks repeatedly, daring to do things, talking to journalists – that is the best training. Do not be afraid and try again and again. And just practise, practise, practise. That is much more important than doing media training once a year.

For a comprehensive crisis preparation, processes and structures (see 4.1.2) should be documented in writing, for instance, in the form of crisis plans or – as it is often called in the communications department – crisis manuals (Coombs, 2019; Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014). These typically contain checklists and contact details. Experts were divided on this topic. For many, it was an irreplaceable part of preparation. Others were sceptical about its utility, "You have a huge manual and then it gets dusty somehow, and then nobody knows how to use it anymore" (Alexander Leinhos). As also stated in the academic literature, the implementation of the plan in the processes is decisive (Drews, 2018; Heide & Simonsson, 2014).

There was a similar discussion around templates of press releases or initial reports. The majority of experts found them helpful to inform stakeholders as fast as possible:

In the end, a crisis will always be different. But if I already have a template that has something to do with a technical problem or other typical crisis situations, I can work with

it. And, of course, I am much faster than if I always start from scratch. (Annette Siragusano)

However, two experts had negative feelings about it. Alexander Leinhos argued, "Before I spend years writing blueprint press releases, of which 99.9 per cent are not used, I prefer to focus on processes and structures that need to mature when the crisis comes." And Martin Frommhold stated:

I am not a fan of having the press release for the crisis already half-finished in the drawer. I think that is complete nonsense. Crises are specific. Pre-prepared text passages are not likely to help. And the time needed to put all possible contingencies into writing can be spent in a better way. What you need are clearly coordinated processes.

This discussion reflects that practice focuses on the applicability of the measure – as demonstrated in processes and structures (see 4.1.2) – rather than being theoretically prepared.

Something fundamental but indispensable for functioning crisis management is spatial and technical requirements. Martin Büllesbach said, "If there is a notable incident, we additionally activate a separate landing page on our website and make all the information available there." Besides such websites, often referred to as dark sites (Hahn & Neuss, 2018; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011), the experts mentioned crisis rooms, other facilities and second SIM cards in case of network infrastructure failure. These were usually prepared together with other departments, for example, IT. Once again, the importance of interdepartmental cooperation (see 4.1.3) becomes apparent.

5   Conclusion

Pre-crisis management empowers organisations to protect themselves and their stakeholders from negative events or reduce their magnitude (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Fearn-Banks, 2016). Communication can greatly support this (Griffin, 2014; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). It is acknowledged in crisis communication that various stakeholders need to be engaged – both externally and internally. However, there has been a tendency for a long time in academia and practice to overlook internal stakeholders, especially employees, despite their great potential to actively contribute to pre-crisis management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Heide & Simonsson, 2020). Therefore, the thesis posed the research question: *How do German crisis communication professionals approach the involvement of internal stakeholders in pre-crisis management?*

In the previous chapters, the topic was first examined from the perspective of academic literature. Based on this, an interview guide was created for an empirical study with 11 German experts. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The main findings of this analysis and an answer to the research question and sub-questions are presented in this chapter, and theoretical and practical implications are provided. Lastly, limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

5.1   Summary of Findings

The study uses two sub-questions that help answer the research question more precisely. The first sub-question refers to crisis prevention: *Which aspects of internal crisis communication are crucial for the success of crisis prevention in organisations in Germany?* The second asks the same question for crisis preparation: *Which aspects of internal crisis communication are crucial for the success of crisis preparation in organisations in Germany?* Both prevention and preparation have their characteristics, but in the course of the analysis, it has become apparent that there is a great deal of overlap regarding the success factors. The reason for this is that crisis communication is only one part of crisis management, and the organisational context has a strong impact. This is illustrated by the fact that the two most prevalent main themes deal with topics beyond the responsibility of one singular department: *coordination and institutionalisation* and *culture*. The two remaining main themes, *professionalisation of communication* and *pre-crisis communication practices*, focus more specifically on communication itself.

With regard to crisis prevention, many practitioners believe more in crisis mitigation because an organisation in the uncertainty of a risk society cannot be immune to crises. In the chapter on pre-crisis communication practices, it becomes clear that regardless of whether experts lean more towards mitigation or prevention as a term, the typical preventative measures of risk, issues, and reputation management can be identified. In particular, scenario development and knowing the big picture are crucial for risk and issues management. If crisis communicators gather as much information as early as possible, it will become much easier to become proactive and initiate measures against the transition into a crisis. It is important to note that integrating internal and external communication measures is the key to success here. Furthermore, communication professionals involve internal stakeholders in external communication but also carry out reputation management internally. Moreover, there is a need for openness in top management to receive and seek advice on communication. Experts consider this a prerequisite to feeling empowered in carrying out crisis prevention that concerns human error in management decisions.

Concerning preparation, the experts state that practice makes perfect. That applies not only to communicators but the whole crisis team, including management. Some interviews illustrated that it could be challenging to involve management in preparation exercises, but it is a vital measure. The main theme of pre-crisis communication practices underlines the importance of regularly conducted, realistic training. These are also essential to condition the mindset for a crisis. Training on the job was occasionally mentioned. Crisis plans and document templates can be helpful and save time, but only if they are aligned with processes and structures. In addition, a spatial and technical infrastructure is part of the preparation. Overall, it appears that the experts prioritised preparation over prevention, which can be explained by the already mentioned inevitability of crises.

As previously mentioned, the dominant themes are those concerning organisational factors which impact both prevention and preparation. The chapter on coordination and institutionalisation reflects that organisations must implement pre-crisis management. In particular, the speed at which new developments occur in the crisis phase underlines the relevance of taking action beforehand. Those who deprioritise crisis prevention and preparation in the stress of everyday business will regret it when the crisis hits. The experts believe that organisations that want to prioritise the pre-crisis phase must inevitably ensure that processes and structures run smoothly. That encompasses well-rehearsed procedures and clear responsibilities. At the same time, agility should be maintained to be able to react to unforeseen developments. Moreover, interdepartmental cooperation is crucial. In particular,

top management, Corporate Security and Legal are important team members besides Communications. In the best case, there should be an established crisis team, but interpersonal relationships with colleagues from other departments who might spot warning signs are meaningful as well. Crisis communication professionals, therefore, put much effort into relationship management.

In terms of culture, there is a preference for highly reliability. Trust is essential, and this includes recognising not only managers but also employees as active stakeholders in pre-crisis management. Additionally, mutual trust is needed between managers and employees. Communicators saw their role here as moderators. One of the central tasks of internal pre-crisis communication is to create crisis awareness. It includes sensitising stakeholders and working towards becoming a resilient organisation. However, the experts emphasise that management must play its part too and demonstrate leadership ability. The CEO, upper, middle and front-line managers should be involved in pre-crisis management. Communication can support management in this process, for example, by spreading messages that are in line with an error culture.

It is crucial for crisis communication professionals that the strategic importance of communication within the organisation is evident, which is one of the aims of the main theme of professionalisation of communication. Conversely, the need for the communication department itself to perform well is recognised. Crisis communication is a difficult, or as some experts stated, even the supreme discipline of the field. Consequently, the department must be set up so that its members are capable of facing the challenge. Skills and experience positively impact this, but the right mindset is decisive as well. For a department to pay adequate attention to crisis communication in the pre-crisis phase, it needs sufficient human resources.

To sum it up, the initial metaphor about smoke detectors (prevention) and fire extinguishers (preparation) can be interpreted literally: Operational matters are an essential part of pre-crisis management. Yet, internal crisis communication can enable employees and managers to act as crisis detectors and extinguishers themselves – under the precondition that culture and organisational structure empower them to do so.

5.2   Theoretical Implications

The results of the study largely confirm existing theories. However, there are some deviations that indicate that the academic literature should consider a broader perspective.

Both practice and academia are in agreement that the pre-crisis phase is crucial for successful crisis communication and management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Jaques, 2013; Mazzei & Butera, 2021). The importance of internal stakeholders is substantiated as well. For the German experts, however, this seemed to be much more established than it appears in the theoretical research (Heide & Simonsson, 2020; Johansen et al., 2012). This observation supports the statement by Schwarz (2016), according to whom crisis communication is already an established practice in Germany and research is lagging behind.

There is a great deal of overlap between practice and academia concerning crisis prevention. It is noteworthy that Coombs' (2019) view of classifying prevention more as mitigation was widely shared among the experts. In relation to this, another theory strongly resonated among the crisis communication professionals. They often mentioned aspects of the risk society, which is traditionally located in risk management (Beck, 2007/2009).

With regard to crisis preparation, the measures discussed in the literature, such as crisis plans, crisis simulations or dark sites (Hahn & Neuss, 2018; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011; Veil, 2010), were reflected in the findings. However, processes and structures played a far more critical role from the experts' point of view. Academic literature addresses the implementation of systematic procedures and clear responsibilities, but not with the same emphasis (Drews, 2018; Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Closing ranks with management literature could lead to a more holistic outlook.

Concerning the organisational factors, the interviews reinforced Taylor's (2010) claim that organisational influences have a greater impact than any individual efforts from communication professionals. In particular, aspects of high-reliability culture such as trust and two-way communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2020) were considered crucial among the experts. One component of the high-reliability culture is resilience (Heide & Simonsson, 2020). Zerfaß and Viertmann (2017) argue that crisis resilience deserves more attention in practice. The interviews reflected this since some experts mentioned resilience as a success factor, but mostly, there was a focus on crisis sensitisation. Nevertheless, there were indications that the debate between anticipation versus resilience is not purposeful (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). As Comfort et al. (2001) note, the approaches can be a helpful complement to each other.

5.3   Practical Implications

The summary of findings (see 5.1) illustrates what it takes to successfully engage internal stakeholders in crisis prevention and preparation as a communication professional. There are many notes of interest to practice worth exploring in more detail. It has been emphasised that organisational influences are more influential than individual efforts in crisis communication (Taylor, 2010). However, this does by no means indicate that communicators are powerless against organisational factors.

There are several ways in which communication can positively impact internal pre-crisis management. The coordination and institutionalisation of internal pre-crisis management offer opportunities for communicators to advocate for the prioritisation of the pre-crisis phase. Herein, they can demonstrate the strategic value of pre-crisis communication, which simultaneously offers the opportunity to advance the professionalisation of communication (Heide, 2013). In addition, the aspect of interdepartmental cooperation, in particular, is exemplary of how many individuals can come together as a team and impact organisational events greatly. Simultaneously, the craftsmanship must be in place, and the practices of pre-crisis communication must be implemented.

It was emphasised several times how important it is that procedures are implemented, and clear responsibilities are known. At the same time, crisis communicators are well advised to maintain certain agility to be able to react to unexpected turns of events. In this regard, the mindset plays an important role, too. Here, it is imperative that the head of crisis communication ensures that the entire team feels well prepared.

For many experts, crisis preparation plays a more vital role than prevention. From an academic perspective, this can be viewed critically (Heide, 2013; Jaques, 2013). In relation to this, it is also questionable whether the assumption that crises can primarily be mitigated and rarely prevented is purposeful. In the interviews, the unpredictability of crises was frequently given as a reason. Risk and issues management can counter this, but not all crises can indeed be prevented (Coombs, 2019; Jaques, 2016). However, this should not mean that crisis prevention only starts when the warning signals are already apparent (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). This is especially true for preventable crises that result from human error (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Helping to increase crisis awareness and support in implementing an error culture can help here.

Admittedly, if the leadership team is not at least somewhat open to suggestions for communication, it will not be easy. Yet, it is an opportunity for communicators to prove their

value. They can spread messages across the organisation that inspire trust and position themselves as mediators between employees and management. Therefore, they must recognise the importance of all internal stakeholders in pre-crisis communication themselves.

Lastly, the lines between internal and external stakeholders are blurred. When communication looks at external and internal stakeholders holistically, this can drive crisis communication forward. It is worthwhile to consider whether this should be reflected in the departmental structure. Integrating Internal and External Communications can prove beneficial, as several interviewees advocated.

5.4   Critical Reflection and Future Research

Many efforts have been made to ensure that the work is comprehensive and meets all scientific standards. Still, certain limitations need to be addressed. The importance of selecting suitable experts for validity has been pointed out (Dorussen et al., 2005). Through a mixture of purposive sampling and snowball sampling, it was possible to make an appropriate selection of experts who met many requirements. Nevertheless, there cannot be representativeness in non-probability sampling (Sarstedt et al., 2018). This is common in qualitative research (Babbie, 2021). Besides, a point of saturation was taken into account in the sampling (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, the sample size of 11 experts is not considered problematic.

It should be noted that it is very likely that only German crisis communication professionals who perceive themselves as experts in the field of internal pre-crisis communication have agreed to be interviewed. On the one hand, expert interviews are precisely designed to benefit from the knowledge of professionals (Johnson, 2011). On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that this makes the results of the interviews somewhat less representative. Nonetheless, many interviewees were self-critical in the interviews and could point to experiences from past jobs when they did not yet have their current level of knowledge.

Another limitation is that the interviews could only be conducted via video software. Occasionally there were technical difficulties when the internet connection was interrupted. These were rare and did not disrupt the flow of the conversation too much. Still, such an interruption would not have occurred in a face-to-face interview, but that was not feasible due to the pandemic.

This work has contributed to a better understanding of the field of internal pre-crisis communication. In particular, the methodology has added to this, as qualitative research on this topic is still scarce. Nevertheless, additional research would be desirable. For example, other research methods could complement this study.

As the experts were asked about the role of both employees and managers, the analysis would be more comprehensive if the first-hand experience of internal stakeholders could be obtained. Several additional methods are conceivable for this. Surveying employees to get a comparison with a larger sample could provide interesting insights (Matthews & Ross, 2010). This could, for example, shed light on the extent to which employees perceive communication measures on crisis awareness; or on the level of trust in managers and the communication department. Based on these results, a questionnaire could be developed to examine the in-depth experiences of employees (Johnson, 2011).

Furthermore, expert interviews could also be conducted with middle and top managers. The topic of leadership style has been studied several times in the past with interviews (Jaques, 2012), but a focus on internal pre-crisis management could provide new insights. This would strengthen the link to the management literature and lead to an integrated view of disciplines. On the downside, such analyses require access to many people, some of whom are difficult to reach. Collecting field observations through a case study in one of the experts' organisations could be more feasible.

Beyond that, it would be interesting to expand the study of crisis communication experts. The experts interviewed for this study all work in Germany, but the interview guide is suitable for research in other countries as well, as it was developed based on international academic literature. Moreover, it would be conceivable to conduct interviews with crisis communication professionals from small or medium-sized organisations. A focus on a specific type of organisation, for example, NGOs or municipalities, would broaden the findings, as most of the experts' experience came from working in profit-oriented companies.

Pre-crisis communication with a focus on internal stakeholders is a field of research that is not yet fully explored and constantly evolving. There are still many phenomena from practice that are worth studying. At the same time, academia can point to practical implications beneficial for experts and aspiring experts. To conclude, internal stakeholder communication can greatly contribute to pre-crisis management, and this area will remain relevant from both an academic and practical point of view in future.

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Appendix A. Sample Description

Name/Referred to as	Interview date	Sex	Position	Professional expertise	Crisis expertise
Alexander Leinhos	18.03.2022	Male	Director Corporate Communications at Vodafone	21 years	15 years
Klaus Treichel	28.03.2022	Male	Former Head of Corporate Communications at ABB, since 2022 Corporate Communications Consultant	37 years	34 years
Martin Büllesbach	31.03.2022	Male	Head of Staff Unit Crisis Communications at Clariant	33 years	31 years
Interviewee 4	01.04.2022	Female	Head of Corporate Press and Internal Communications	20 years	20 years
Christian Maertin	06.04.2022	Male	Head of Corporate Communications and Media Relations at Bayer	30 years	15 years
Martin Frommhold	07.04.2022	Male	Division Manager Corporate Communications at OTTO (GmbH & Co KG)	24 years	22 years
Interviewee 7	05.04.2022	Female	Communications and Marketing Director	12 years	9 years
Timo Krupp	12.04.2022	Male	Head of Media Relations at Currenta	20 years	10 years
Interviewee 9	06.05.2022	Female	Internal Communications Officer	2,5 years	2,5 years
Annette Siragusano	06.05.2022	Female	Global Head of Content Strategy and Cross Channel Campaign Management at Engel & Völkers	20 years	15 years
Lara Flemming	13.05.2022	Female	Senior Vice President Corporate Communications and Marketing at EOS Group	30 years	17 years

Appendix B. Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

Please introduce yourself briefly at the beginning: What is your position in the organisation? How long have you been working there? What are your responsibilities?

- In what way are you responsible for crisis communication in the organisation?
- With what attitude do you approach crisis management and its communication?
- When does a crisis become a crisis for you?

Main Questions

1) Let us imagine the everyday business. There are no signs that a crisis is imminent. What place does crisis communication have in such a phase?
   a. (Before the crisis, crisis phase and after the crisis: What significance do these phases of crisis communication have in the organisation?)
2) What do you do to prevent crises in the organisation?
   a. Can you describe a situation in which you succeeded in identifying a potential problem early on and taking countermeasures?
   (What was the decisive factor in this?)
   b. How do you find out about a possible crisis in the organisation?
3) One can never entirely rule out the possibility of a crisis. How does crisis preparation work in your organisation?
   (Are there action plans, training, et cetera?)
4) Comparing internal and external stakeholders in the pre-crisis phase: Which stakeholders do you think to play a particularly important role in the pre-crisis phase?
5) Which department in the organisation is driving crisis prevention and crisis preparation?
   a. Is there organised cooperation with other departments?
   (For example, with Human Resources or people who work in critical areas and can assess risks)
6) What strategies do you use to involve internal stakeholders in pre-crisis communication actively?
7) Let us talk in more detail about the differences between the internal stakeholders.
   a. How do you engage the CEO in pre-crisis communications?

       i.   What about other members of the management team?

            (For example, other board members or management below C-level)

      ii.   (How willing and understanding is the management team to engage in crisis communication before the crisis?)

   b.   How do you engage employees in pre-crisis communication?

   c.   Are there other stakeholders in the organisation who play a special role in the pre-crisis phase? (Who? Why are they relevant?)

8) What role does organisational culture play in crisis communication?

   a.   Can you give an example of what this looks like in practice?

   b.   How can a crisis awareness culture be achieved?

9) To what extent does the leadership style in the organisation influence pre-crisis communication?

   a.   To what extent do you try to influence this before a crisis?

Summing it up

10) What already works well in pre-crisis communication?

11) Where do you see a need for improvement?

Ending

- Is there anything related to the topic that we did not cover, but you think is important?
- (To summarise, the most important points from today's conversation were …)
- Do you have any questions or comments on the interview?

Thank you for your openness and participation.

Appendix C. Coding Scheme

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Coordination and institutionalisation	Prioritisation of pre-crisis phase	Wish versus reality
		Preventable crises
		Crisis mitigation
		Preparation is key
	Processes and structures	Systematic procedures
		Clear responsibilities
		Agility
	Interdepartmental cooperation	Crisis team
		Relationship management
Culture	Trust and appreciation	Employees are key stakeholders
		Management trusts employees
		Employees trust management
	Crisis awareness	Sensitisation
		Resilience
	Leadership	Role models
		A matter for the boss
		Involved management
		Error culture
Professionalisation of communication	Role within the organisation	Influence within the organisation
		Management consulting
	Communicative capabilities	Skills and experiences
		Mindset
		Resources
Pre-crisis communication practices	Crisis prevention	Risk and issues management
		Reputation management
	Crisis preparation	Crisis simulations and training
		Crisis plans and manuals
		Templates
		Spatial and technical requirements