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## Case Study Analysis: Exploring Johnson & Johnson's 1982 Tylenol Contamination Crisis and Ongoing Talcum Powder Crisis Through The Six Principles of Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication

Caroline Tibbs

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CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: EXPLORING JOHNSON & JOHNSON'S 1982 TYLENOL  
CONTAMINATION CRISIS AND ONGOING TALCUM POWDER CONTAMINATION  
CRISIS THROUGH THE SIX PRINCIPLES OF CRISIS AND EMERGENCY RISK  
COMMUNICATION

By  
Caroline Tibbs

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford  
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Approved by:

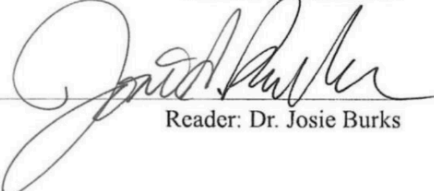


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*To Dr. Amanda Bradshaw and Professor Debbie Hall: I truly could not have completed any part of this thesis without your help and guidance. I am extremely grateful that I have had the opportunity to learn from both of you and grow as a young communications professional, and I feel lucky to view you as not only my mentors but also a part of my Ole Miss family.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2002, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed a new field of communication, called Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC). With the creation of this new field, the CDC developed a streamlined CERC guidebook in order to provide a standard for the crisis communication strategies and responses of specifically healthcare organizations, but any organization can benefit from utilizing the CERC framework. The CDC also identified six key principles of CERC, which are as follows: response time (“be first”), accuracy (“be right”), credibility (“be credible”), having empathy (“express empathy”), promotion of actions (“promote actions”), and respectfulness (“show respect”).

This thesis explores two case studies, the 1982 Johnson & Johnson Tylenol contamination crisis and the ongoing Johnson & Johnson talcum powder contamination crisis, through the lens of the six principles of CERC. Utilizing both a semi-structured guide and the “think aloud” interview approach, primary data was gathered qualitatively through interviews with 10 University of Mississippi integrated marketing communications students and through interviews with six communications professionals. These interviews were conducted to understand how both communications professionals and students describe the two Johnson & Johnson case studies and how the crisis response varied for each case study. Analysis of this data revealed seven themes that highlight the levels of success of Johnson & Johnson’s responses in adhering to the six CERC principles.

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## INTRODUCTION

For all organizations, corporations, and businesses, crisis communication is an essential part of operations during a crisis. The way that an organization communicatively handles a crisis dictates how successfully the organization can rebuild any damages in revenue, consumer relations, and reputations resulting from the crisis (Marsen, 2019). Having effective crisis communication begins with developing a crisis communication plan, which details potential crises and affected publics and the best communication responses and tactics for those crises.

However, many organizational leadership boards tend to undervalue the importance of creating a crisis communication plan: in a February 2023 survey by *Capterra*, only 49% of 243 surveyed companies said that they have a formal crisis communication plan. On the other hand, 98% of businesses who did have a crisis plan and have used it before found it effective in maintaining communication with their consumers, with 77% reporting that their plans were very effective in doing so (Capers, 2023). Therefore, it is clear that effective crisis communication is key for an organization to implement during a crisis - this has even been recognized by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) who, in 2002, created the six principles of crisis and emergency risk management (CERC). The CERC framework is intended for use by health organizations, like one of the most recognizable health, hygiene, and medication brands, Johnson & Johnson. By examining Johnson & Johnson's adherence to and use of the six CERC principles in their crisis communication responses to two crises, the 1982 Tylenol crisis and the current talcum powder crisis, powerful information about successful crisis communication can be



realized and can be utilized to educate organizations on best-practice crisis communication strategies.

### **Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Principles**

Developed in 2002 by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, CERC is a communication framework that combines the fields of crisis communication and risk communication. CERC was created specifically for healthcare organizations so that these organizations could have a helpful guide when faced with a crisis or emergency situation (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). One of the foundational elements of CERC is its six principles, which are as follows:

1. Be first (response time)
2. Be right (accuracy)
3. Be credible (credibility)
4. Express empathy (having empathy)
5. Promoting actions (promotion of actions)
6. Respect (respectfulness)

According to Reynolds and Lutfy (2018), these six principles should be highly present in organizational crisis communication responses, as the strict adherence to these principles can result in successful crisis management and effective communication between an organization and its publics.

### **The 1982 Tylenol Crisis**

From its introduction into the American market in 1955, Tylenol made a name for itself as the nation's number one choice in over-the-counter pain relievers (Alonso, 2022). However, an unthinkable situation unfolded in the Chicago area in late September 1982: an individual

walked into multiple drug stores, opened multiple bottles of Tylenol extra-strength capsules, squeezed the capsules open, sprinkled deadly cyanide powder into the capsules' contents, and promptly placed the bottles back on the shelves. Seven consumers who bought contaminated bottles, unaware of the poisoned pills within them, died from ingesting the pills, prompting a thorough investigation which concluded the deaths were from cyanide poisoning and the commonality amongst people who died was ingesting Tylenol extra-strength pills. This report immediately placed both Tylenol and its parent company, Johnson & Johnson, in the spotlight, as the contamination of the pills was an unprecedented situation and terrified millions of Americans as the origin of the cyanide had yet to be discovered.

This crisis was an external crisis, meaning that the crisis involved the public (HMA Public Relations) - additionally, the crisis involved deaths, adding a complex element into the situation. Johnson & Johnson reacted quickly and effectively in order to disseminate vital information to the public and quell rising national panic (Harris et al., 2002).

The efforts of Johnson & Johnson, as examined through the six principles of CERC, demonstrated effective use of these principles and set a crisis communication precedence, according to most scholars who have studied this case (Harris et al., 2008; Adubato, 2008; Gutowski, 2022). Through the implementation of nationwide Tylenol recalls, informational advertisements, a designated hotline number (these were the days prior to social media and the Internet), press conferences, appearances on television news programs, and the redesign of Tylenol packaging, including a new, triple-sealed bottle which was the first of its kind in America, Johnson & Johnson successfully overcame this tragic crisis situation and rebuilt Tylenol's, as well as their own, reputation (L. Westbrook, classroom presentation, October 11, 2023).

## **The Ongoing Talcum Powder Crisis**

*Reuters* (2018) published an article revealing evidence that Johnson & Johnson knew past samples of their talc powder tested positive for asbestos contamination. Even though this occurred in the 1970s, the issue arises in that the company never made the information public. Since 2009, women diagnosed with ovarian cancer have sued Johnson & Johnson for damages, claiming the use of their talc-based Baby Powder product in the vaginal areas caused their cancers. After the *Reuters* report, public outrage led to thousands of women suing the company. As of December 2023, individuals filed more than 50,000 lawsuits against Johnson & Johnson (Simon, 2024). The company reached an agreement in January 2024 to pay \$700 million to all unsettled lawsuits.

Examined through the six CERC principles, this case, compared to the Tylenol case, lacks the same effectiveness and overall success. Despite evidence provided in the *Reuters* article, Johnson & Johnson maintain the stance that their talc powder was not contaminated with asbestos; in addition, they lengthened the litigation process by filing for bankruptcy three different times from 2021 - 2024. As the crisis is still ongoing, the resolution phase of the crisis has yet to occur (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018), but the public has taken to social media throughout the crisis's duration to express their frustration, disappointment, and their vows to never trust Johnson & Johnson again.

In a literature review, this thesis will examine the background of CERC, the contents of the CERC manual, and the six principles of CERC and real-world applications of the principles. Next, the review will explore the background of Johnson & Johnson, its credo, and a brief overview of its CEO history. Finally, the review will study the background information of both

the Tylenol crisis and the talcum powder crisis and will utilize secondary research to analyze both crises through the six CERC principles.

The purpose of this study is to understand how both communications professionals and integrated marketing communications students view the crisis communication responses implemented by Johnson & Johnson and to compare the thoughts of professionals and students in regards to each crisis. By utilizing artificial intelligence software to generate synopses for interviewees about each crisis and the CERC principles, this study incorporates digital tools and emerging technologies as the lens to analyze seminal crisis communication case studies. Finally, this study thoroughly examines student insights by using the “think aloud” protocol, which allows for a deeper understanding of how students view Johnson & Johnson’s crisis communication responses and produces overall more enlightened interpretations of the thoughts of these students in real time (Güss, 2018).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview of Crisis Emergency and Response Communication (CERC)

For the healthcare industry, 2001 represented a year marked by several crisis situations, most notably the anthrax attacks targeting American media professionals and governmental figures, the international H5N1 influenza scare, and the disastrous September 11th terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City (Veil et al., 2008), which killed around 3,000 people and injured 6,000 people (Blinken, 2023). These unprecedented incidents caused “challenges for the medical and public health community to communicate in accurate, credible, timely, and reassuring ways” (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005 as cited in Veil et al., 2008). In October 2002, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed a crisis communication framework that all healthcare and emergency management organizations could implement within their crisis communication strategies and response plans (Veil et al., 2008).

Called Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC), this framework was created with the healthcare industry in mind. CERC provides standardized principles that, by possessing relevance to both health and emergency management organizations, bridges the gap between healthcare crisis communication and risk management responses (Veil et al., 2008). The CDC identified six core principles of CERC: be first, be right, be credible, express empathy, promote actions, and show respect (CDC, 2018). These can be understood as response time, accuracy, credibility, having empathy, promotion of actions, and respectfulness, respectively.

Despite CERC's creation as a tool for the healthcare industry, its principles are relevant to any organization in any industry. According to leading crisis communication expert Melissa Agnes, every organization, no matter the industry in which its in, its affiliation, or its profit status, should develop a thorough crisis response plan and ensure that key employees and stakeholders are aware of this plan's content and understand the steps they need to take should a crisis situation occur (Agnes, 2018). While Agnes' specialization is general crisis communication education (not specifically for healthcare organizations), she recognizes the same key principles included in CERC as valuable items for any organization to address when creating a crisis plan.

The CERC manual and subsequent educational courses were developed in October 2002 by professionals with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC's intended target audience for the CERC manual is "anyone who communicates on behalf of an organization responding to a public health emergency" (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2). This audience includes any communication professional working with hospitals, appointment-only clinics, emergency clinics, medical laboratories, brands that manufacture, distribute, and/or sell medical equipment and/or medications, local, state, and federal departments of health, assisted living facilities, and pharmacies; however, this list is not all-inclusive as every public health emergency is unique and does not necessarily affect the same people and organizations.

The most updated version of the CERC manual is from 2018 - this version was authored by Barbara Reynolds and Caitlyn Lutfy. As the former senior communications and crisis advisor at the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Reynolds partnered several times with crisis communication expert and Wayne State University academic Matthew Seeger to academically

analyze CERC and its effects on the public health sector. In their academic paper titled “Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication as an Integrative Model”, Reynolds and Seeger state that the need for CERC’s creation became realized after a series of public health emergencies occurred in 2001-2002 that were relatively new to public health organizations and, therefore, had never truly been managed before (2005). From bioterrorism to natural disasters to severe epidemics, health organizations across America faced unprecedented crises during these two years, and they had received no prior training on how to best handle these crises with effective communication since the CERC program was not yet in existence. It was apparent that some type of standardized, streamlined public health crisis communication framework needed to be developed (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005). Thus, the CERC framework and programs were born.

CERC combines the fields of risk and crisis communication into one structure. According to Reynolds and Seeger, risk communication “most often involves the production of public messages regarding health risks and environmental hazards” (2005). In practice, risk communication is often implemented by local, state, and federal emergency management organizations to alert the public of a danger and then to offer behavioral changes that can remedy the danger (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005). On the other hand, crisis communication involves strategically responding to a crisis situation through the perspective of the involved organization or people - the duty of crisis communication management usually is given to public relations (PR) professionals within an organization (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005). In public health emergencies, these two fields of communication are often intertwined, especially in situations that directly affect the public. Threats to public safety involve issuing risk communication messages, but these threats also attract media interest and coverage, bringing in the need for crisis communication responses (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Therefore, the CDC decided to

utilize practices from both of these fields in order to develop an all-encompassing health communication framework (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018).

The introduction section of the CERC manual states that the CERC framework was scientifically informed by psychological and communication sciences research, issues management studies, and emergency response case studies (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2). By utilizing research from these fields, CERC offers an informed framework that provides unique guidance for health organizations in times of crisis.

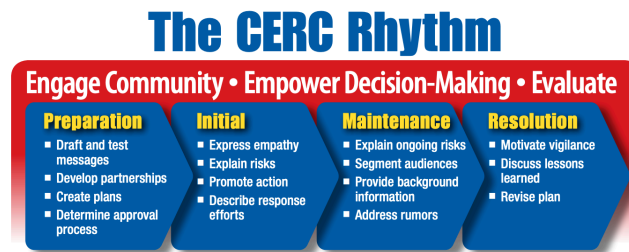
Within the introduction section of the CERC manual lies a chronological model of crisis phases and the best practices to implement when handling each phase. The first phase is called preparation, which is the period of time that occurs before a crisis situation begins. During the preparation phase, the CERC manual explains that organizations should develop meaningful partnerships with other organizations that would be beneficial should a crisis occur; draft and test messages to a variety of target audiences; prepare for the specific emergency situations that the organization is likely to face; create a crisis communication plan; select communication spokespersons and train them, determine the process for how outgoing communication and information will be approved; and reach out to surrounding communities to get to know how to best serve them (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018).

The second phase occurs during an actual crisis situation. Called the initial phase, the CERC manual states that during this phase, organizations should express empathy if the situation requires that action; provide easily understandable and accessible explanations of what the risks are to the public; provide explanations of what the public can do to keep themselves safe; and establish trust and credibility among the public (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Third, the maintenance phase describes the period of time during which the crisis is ongoing. During this



phase, the CERC manual recommends that organizations should ensure that there are no long periods of time without any communication and that the community understands what is going on and what they can do while the crisis is occurring; provide more background information as more information becomes available; if necessary, develop tailored explanations of risks if the crisis affects different audiences; include the community in response and aid efforts; and address any inaccurate information or misunderstandings about the crisis and any public risks caused by it (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). The last phase identified by the CERC manual is the resolution phase, which occurs at the conclusion of a crisis situation. Sometimes, it can be difficult to dictate when a crisis has been resolved; the beginning of the resolution phase can take months or even years to occur. Nevertheless, the manual recommends that during this phase, organizations should keep reaching out to affected community members and expressing empathy; encourage community preparedness for future emergency situations; analyze the situation and determine any lessons learned and any improvements that could be made in the crisis response process; and evaluate the success of the organization's crisis communication plan (Reynolds and Lutfy).

Health communication researchers Shari Veil and Timothy Sellnow with aforementioned researchers Reynolds and Seeger explain that CERC's identification of these phases and actions within each phase sets the CERC program apart from other traditional models of crisis management - CERC positions each phase as part of an entire crisis communication system, offering explanations for what might occur during each phase and what procedures organizations should follow (Veil et al., 2008). The CERC phase model is included below as an image.



**Figure 1: The Phases of a Crisis According to CERC (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018)**

In addition to the introduction chapter, the CERC manual includes chapters on the psychology of a crisis, messages and audiences, community engagement, crisis communication plans, spokespersons, and working with the media.

The psychology of a crisis section analyzes the different ways in which people process information during a crisis situation, the different mental and emotional states people may experience, like uncertainty, fear, anxiety, dread, hopelessness, helplessness, denial, and panic (the manual admits that in real-world crisis situations, most people do not panic, but people tend to think that they would do so if they were to experience a crisis), certain behaviors that people may exhibit, and how an organization can address psychology within the crisis communication phases (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018).

In the messages and audiences section, Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) explain the importance of an organization knowing their key audiences, how an organization's accuracy within their messages can build credibility and trust among their audiences, and the importance of gathering feedback after a crisis scenario.

The community engagement chapter of the manual explores the roles of communities during emergencies and during each phase of a crisis, the different types of community relationships, varying levels of community engagement and which level an organization should

implement in their communication strategy, and advice and best practices for engaging a community (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018).

Being the longest section in the manual, the crisis communication plans section provides detailed steps and information on how organizations should develop and organize their crisis communication plans. Additionally, Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) provide in-depth information on how organizations can implement their plans within the first 48 hours of a crisis and as the crisis remains ongoing.

The next section is all about spokespersons: this section stresses the need for a designated spokesperson who will act as the face of an organization during a crisis. In general, people are more responsive to messages coming from one person rather than the organization as a whole, so it is important for organizations to identify that one person and prepare them for that role (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Additionally, this section emphasizes the importance of training the spokesperson on handling media relations. Media coverage is a constant of any given crisis situation - the media's main responsibility is letting the public know about current events and affairs, and crises are especially interesting for media professionals to cover as many crises often affect the public in some way, especially emergency and health crisis situations. Organization spokespeople have to learn how to best speak with media professionals, which is something Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) include in this section.

This leads into the last chapter, which discusses working with the media. In this chapter, Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) more deeply explore the roles of media in an emergency and a crisis and provide strategies on interacting with the media, facilitating positive media relationships, giving reporters the information they need to correctly cover the crisis, giving emergency information to the media, writing for the media, ensuring the media's needs are being met during

the crisis, and responding to errors, misconceptions, and myths made by the media. Together, the seven chapters of the CERC manual serve as a comprehensive, thorough guide on not only the basics of risk and crisis communication but also on all aspects of a crisis situation.

In order to train health communication professionals on CERC practices and principles, the CDC offers CERC training programs and webinars. According to CDC Senior Health Communication Specialist Kellee Waters, the information taught within the CERC programs are utilized by communication professionals to develop effective messages that “help people do the best they can in trying times” (Waters, 2018). In a short quote, Waters (2018) explains the need for teaching a framework like CERC: “The reason this is necessary is because the right message, the right information given at the right time from the right person really can save lives”. On their online blog, the CDC has several real-world examples of successful CERC implementation by communication professionals. One such example features an account by the environmental health specialist (who is anonymous) with the Wayne County Health Department in Richmond, Indiana. Within this account, the environmental health specialist described a crisis situation in 2014 in which the health department received word that candy sold in the area possibly had been contaminated with pesticide chemicals - after thorough testing, it was determined that this accusation was true (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Since the environmental health specialist had attended several CERC training sessions, he knew exactly what to do when the health department was contacted by local media reporters who were requesting interviews (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention). By utilizing what the CERC programs taught him, the environmental health specialist ensured that all communication in the interview was factual, direct, and empathetic and that proper steps were taken to inform their community of any vital information pertaining to their safety and to keep communicating with the public while the

crisis was ongoing (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention). This resulted in a successful crisis management on the health department's part, and the crisis situation concluded with the organization's credibility in good standing. (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention).

Another example of successful CERC implementation is seen in an account by the risk communication coordinator (who is anonymous) of the Connecticut Department of Public Health. The risk communication coordinator recounts a severe October 2011 snowstorm that resulted in the power outage for more than 860,000 utility customers (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention). As a result, many residents decided to use outdoor generators and grills to produce heat in their homes, which led to 134 carbon monoxide poisonings (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Having attended CERC training sessions, the risk communication coordinator explained that the public health department employees understood the need for speed in their messages, so they uploaded all snowstorm-related information to an individual website, providing quick access for Connecticut residents (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention). The public health department also utilized social media platforms, like Twitter (known as Twitter at the time - now called X) and Facebook, to quickly alert residents of any updates and provide actions residents could take to keep them and their loved ones safe (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention). The risk communication coordinator stated that the evaluation stage was especially critical for this situation, as the public health department analyzed the situation afterwards and determined the necessity for preparedness for future snowstorms, which included focus group studies on food safety in power outages and carbon monoxide safety (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Thus, CERC programs are

beneficial for communications professionals, and learning about the CERC framework and principles can drastically improve an organization's response to a crisis.

## Analysis of Each CERC Principle

CERC identifies six principles as crucial to risk and crisis communication, as depicted in the CERC manual graphic below.



**Figure 2: The Six Principles of CERC (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018)**

As directly named in the manual, the principles are as follows: be first, be right, be credible, express empathy, promote actions, and show respect. These principles can also be understood as response time, accuracy, credibility, having empathy, promotion of actions, and respectfulness, respectively. In the CERC manual, these principles play an important role as they are the foundation for all CERC strategies and actions that they recommend for organizations within each crisis phase (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). According to Kellee Waters, CERC principles are especially pertinent to situations that require immediate communication and action from responsible organizations, like sudden severe weather conditions, natural disasters, and

epidemics - these are the types of crises that health organizations are most likely to handle (Waters, 2018). When integrated correctly into crisis communication plans, these principles can ensure an organization's messages are clear, concise, and actionable (Waters, 2018).

Response time (be first) is the first principle listed in the CERC manual. The manual describes response time as the following: "Crises are time-sensitive. Communicating information quickly is crucial. For members of the public, the first source of information often becomes the preferred source" (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). How quickly a responsible organization responds to a crisis situation can dictate how successfully the organization will handle the crisis. Waters (2018) explains that being the very first entity to release information about a crisis can be difficult, as the public often first obtains news information on social media or 24-hour news networks. Although an organization might not be the first to release the story, Waters (2018) emphasizes that they should be the first to share what they are directly responsible for within the crisis situation. According to the "Psychology of a Crisis" chapter of the CERC manual, one of the ways in which people process information is by believing the first message they see (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). When information about a potentially harmful situation is not immediately provided, people naturally begin to speculate, which can cause negative emotions, like fear and anxiety (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Providing a fast response reduces the possibility of an organization's audience developing these emotions, which also helps with trust and credibility throughout the crisis (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018).

Accuracy (be right) is a principle that is closely related to response time. In addition to having a quick response time, it is imperative that organizations ensure that all the information which they are conveying about a crisis is correct. According to Waters, being accurate does not mean that an organization has to have all the facts immediately - instead, the organization should

release only the facts that they currently know (Waters, 2018). If an organization does not have all the facts yet, Waters (2018) emphasizes that the organization should explain this in their communication and state that once they receive more information that they will release it publicly. According to Reynolds and Lutfy, having accuracy in an organization's initial message is important because, as previously mentioned, people will believe the first message that they see - if there's inaccurate information in the first message they see, they will believe that, which could harm the organization and cause unnecessary stress for affected publics (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Additionally, Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) explain that in crisis situations, people commonly seek information from familiar sources that they find credible, whether the source involves information directly from the responsible organization or not. Inaccuracies across multiple media sources frequently happen, especially in the early stages of a crisis in which not all background information is known. For the responsible organization, quickly releasing accurate statements across multiple platforms is the best way to ensure that the public is aware of the facts of the crisis (Reynolds and Lutfy).

The next principle identified in the CERC manual is credibility (be credible). According to Waters, credibility means establishing trust between the organization and its audience through being honest in all communication (Waters, 2018). The "Psychology of a Crisis" chapter of the CERC manual states that oftentimes, communication professionals are taught to appear confident when communicating publicly, even when, in reality, they are uncertain about the crisis situation at hand (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). In order to build credibility, communication professionals should acknowledge uncertainty and address any other negative emotions that their audience may be experiencing (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Communication professionals should also be transparent about the process that their organization is implementing in order to remedy the crisis



situation and/or to help affected publics. According to Reynolds and Lutfy, this type of transparency can help to reduce feelings of anxiety, fear, hopelessness, and helplessness and can help increase the likelihood that affected publics will trust the organization. Additionally, Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) emphasize that any promises an organization makes to their audience - such as promises regarding the post-crisis process or actions the organization will take to rebuild audience relations - should only be made if the organization is actually able to go through with the promises. If an organization makes promises that they do not intend to keep, this exhibits dishonesty and is misleading to their audience, and, ultimately, will negatively impact credibility. Establishing trust during a crisis situation also means that an organization's audience is more likely to trust them in any future crises, which positively influences audience relations and means that, in a future crisis, the credibility principle is already largely established (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018)

According to Waters, the next principle of expressing empathy helps with building trust, as she explains in the following quote: "Empathy can help build trust by demonstrating that you really are there for people, that you really understand what they're going through, that you get it" (Waters, 2018). As defined in the "Messages and Audiences" chapter in the CERC manual, empathy is "the state of actively considering and recognizing how someone else feels and perceives a situation" (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) explain that using personal and inclusive language - like using the pronouns "we", "us", and "our" or using words like "together" and "all" - within crisis communication messages creates the impression that the responsible organization is considering affected publics' feelings as well and not just the organization's own feelings and that the organization understands the situation from the perspective of affected publics. However, organizations should be careful not to confuse

expressing empathy with expressing sympathy in their messages. Waters (2018) explains the distinction between expressing empathy and expressing sympathy (which is something many organizations tend to do) - empathetic statements include phrasing that acknowledges emotions affected publics might be experiencing and validates these feelings, while sympathetic statements simply state, to some extent, that the company is sorry for what has happened. Waters (2018) gives the following example of an empathetic statement: “During times like these, all of us feel a little uncertain” - this statement feels personal and, by recognizing feelings of uncertainty, demonstrates that the responsible organization truly has care for affected publics. To contrast, Waters (2018) provides the following example of a sympathetic statement: “We’re thinking of you during this difficult time”, which feels less personal and is almost dismissive of people’s feelings and emotions.

The fifth principle of CERC is promotion of actions (promote actions). According to Reynolds and Lutfy, giving affected people “meaningful things to do calms anxiety, helps restore order, and promotes some sense of control” (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Essentially, the responsible organization can help reduce negative emotions experienced by the public during a crisis by providing crisis-related tasks that, if completed, can help remedy aspects of the crisis situation. For example, during a tornado warning, the National Weather Service tells people to move to an interior room with no windows or to move to the closest shelter if a person is in a car. These tasks help people stay as safe as possible in a dangerous weather situation, and completing these tasks can aid in reducing feelings of anxiety and fear during a tornado. According to Waters, promoting actions will not completely erase feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, but it instead provides a sort of distraction from the crisis situation at hand (Waters, 2018). In the CERC manual’s “Psychology of a Crisis” chapter, the emotions of hopelessness and helplessness

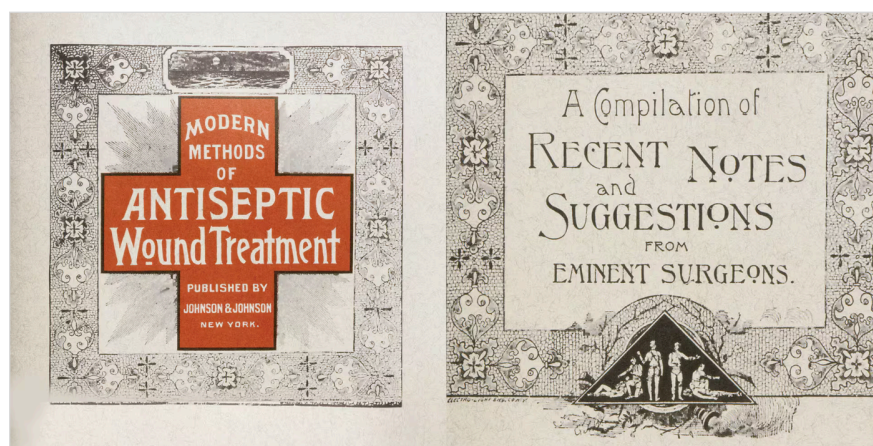
are defined as “the feeling that nothing can be done by anyone to make the situation better” and “the feeling that people have that they, themselves, have no power to improve their situation or protect themselves”, respectively (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Affected people in a crisis situation can experience both of these feelings, which result from unaddressed anxiety, fear, confusion and dread (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). According Reynolds and Lutfy, avoiding these two feelings in affected people is crucial for the responsible organization - fortunately, these feelings can largely be avoided through the promotion of actions principle (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018).

Respectfulness is the last of the six CERC principles. Waters (2018) states that showing respect to affected people seems obvious but that, in times of emergency, organizations often forget this important principle. Recognizing that people impacted by a crisis are not one big object and that, instead, these people are individuals with lives - they have jobs, families, loved ones, etc. - and that they deserve to be treated as such is crucial for an organization to realize during a crisis (Waters, 2018). According to Reynolds and Lutfy, an organization exhibiting respect within their messages is especially important in promoting cooperation between affected publics and the organization and developing rapport between these publics and the organization (Reynolds and Lutfy).

### **Overview of Johnson & Johnson’s Company History**

In the late 1800s, hygiene standards for medical professionals were minimal to non-existent. During the Civil War, surgeries and amputations were often performed quickly without any protection, like gloves and masks, and surgeons rarely washed their hands or sanitized the patient’s surgical site (Johnson & Johnson). Additionally, proper measures were not in place for post-surgical care, and because of this, fatal infections of the surgical or amputation

site were a common occurrence for Civil War soldiers (Johnson & Johnson). As a young apprentice to a pharmaceutical company in Poughkeepsie, New York during the Civil War, Robert Wood Johnson noticed this alarming trend. Along with his brothers James Wood Johnson and Edward Mead Johnson, Robert Johnson was inspired to start his own pharmaceutical company in 1873, called Johnson & Johnson (Johnson & Johnson). According to Johnson & Johnson's company timeline, the company quickly expanded and, in 1886, became the world's first mass-producer of sterile surgical supplies, specifically gauze, sutures, and absorbent cotton. Johnson & Johnson was one of the first medical companies to recognize the unsafe hygiene practices exhibited by most medical professionals at the time; to combat these practices, Johnson & Johnson published a how-to book for medics titled *Modern Methods of Antiseptic Wound Treatment* (pictured below), which revolutionized the medical field at the time (Johnson & Johnson). That combined with their sterile surgical dressings caused Johnson & Johnson to lead the way in safer medical procedures and more educated surgeons, which resulted in thousands of lives saved prior to the turn of the 20th century (Johnson & Johnson).



**Figure 3: Modern Methods of Antiseptic Wound Treatment (Johnson & Johnson)**

During the 20th century, Johnson & Johnson continued to expand its company reach and its product catalog, and it became a powerhouse in the medical manufacturing industry. Today, Johnson & Johnson holds international recognition as one of the most notable pharmaceutical, healthcare, and hygiene companies. Over the past century, the company has become a successful international brand (Johnson & Johnson) that generated a total of \$80.5 billion in revenue last year (Statista, 2024) and claims 13% of the brand-name pharmaceutical manufacturing market share in the United States, which is the second largest share by a single company (IBIS World, 2024).

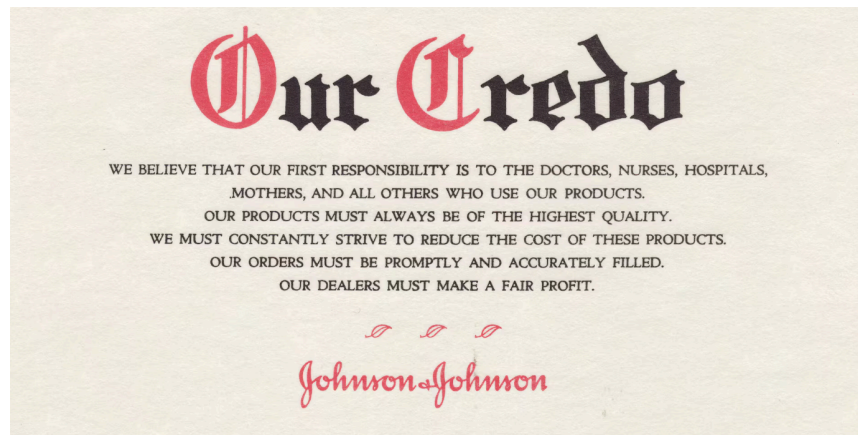
When Johnson & Johnson was first established in 1873, founders and brothers Robert, Edward, and James Johnson ensured that their company was not only a leader in revolutionizing the medical field but also a leader in practicing corporate social responsibility: “From its founding, the company has been guided by a value system that prioritizes people over profits” (Johnson & Johnson). In a time period dominated by unsafe and unpleasant working conditions, Johnson & Johnson was one of the first Industrial Age-era companies to provide onsite medical care, free educational classes, and subsidized housing for all its employees (Johnson & Johnson). Additionally, the company was dedicated to serving their communities through providing their sterile medical products to injury camps in the 1898 Spanish-American War, the 1900 Galveston Hurricane, and the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake - still a relatively new company in 1898, Johnson & Johnson took a substantial profit loss when they decided to “ensure that the U.S. Army had enough sterile dressings for the wounded” (Johnson & Johnson) during the Spanish-American War, which saw 2,061 American casualties (TopSCHOLAR).

During the Great Depression, a period of unprecedented financial hardships for most Americans, Johnson & Johnson’s CEO at time time, Robert Johnson’s son Robert Wood Johnson

II, increased employee wages, reduced working hours, and created new jobs within the company, while thousands of American companies were doing the very opposite (Johnson & Johnson). Johnson II advocated for other companies to view consumers, employees, and society on the same, if not higher, level of importance as making profits. In order to get his message across to the entire country, Johnson II published a pamphlet, *Try Reality*, in which he stated his beliefs about the vitality of consumers and employees to a company's success and attempted to convince entrepreneurs across America that companies should put their focus on more than just profits (Johnson & Johnson). These ideas led to the creation of Johnson & Johnson's credo, the company's sacred business philosophy that is a culmination of all their founding principles and by which all company employees, from factory workers all the way to the CEO, should follow and implement in all business activities (Johnson & Johnson).

In 1943, Johnson II wrote and published "Our Credo", which embodied Johnson & Johnson's commitment to four key principles, in order of importance to the company: responsibility to the medical profession, patients and consumers; responsibility to employees; responsibility to the community; and responsibility to stockholders (Gurowitz, 2013). Johnson II saw consumers as one of the most important groups of people to Johnson & Johnson and stockholders as the least important group, which was a new idea among major corporations during the mid-20th century (Bergeron, 2023). According to Johnson & Johnson historian Margaret Gurowitz, at the time "Our Credo" was developed, it was "one of the earliest statements of corporate social responsibility...Our Credo was novel, with an emphasis on the ethical values that would guide Johnson & Johnson - and the obligation to put the needs and well-being of the people we serve first" (Gurowitz, 2023 as cited in Bergeron, 2023). Part of Johnson II's vision for "Our Credo" was for the document to serve as a guiding force for Johnson

& Johnson employees for as long as the corporation actively remains in business (Bergeron, 2023). Now, 81 years after Johnson II wrote "Our Credo" (pictured below), the values found within it, according to Gurowitz (2023) still direct Johnson & Johnson's business, financial, communication, and community efforts.



**Figure 4: Our Credo (Johnson & Johnson)**

In 1976, James Burke became the sixth CEO of Johnson & Johnson. Before becoming CEO, he was the president of the company's domestic operating units beginning in 1966 (Alonso, 2022). With a masters degree in business administration from Harvard University, Burke had no background in either the pharmaceutical or medical fields, unlike his five predecessors (Johnson & Johnson). Robert Johnson I, Robert Johnson II, James Johnson, Philip Hoffman, and Richard Sellars - the previous CEOs of the company - all had experience in pharmacology; however, Burke's specialization was marketing (Brown, 2012). He was behind the successful launches of some of Johnson & Johnson's most famous products, like baby shampoo, disposable contact lenses, and, most notably, Tylenol (Brown, 2012).

During his time as president of Johnson & Johnson's domestic operating units, Burke believed Johnson & Johnson's main focus should be consumer products and not products

specifically developed for medical facilities, which historically had been the company's niche (Alonso, 2022). Because of Burke's dedication to consumer products, Johnson & Johnson's shares of the consumer markets for both hygiene and medicinal products increased significantly - Johnson & Johnson even managed to gain half of the feminine hygiene products market by 1973 (Alonso, 2022). In 1975, right before Burke became CEO, he saw an opportunity with Johnson & Johnson's newly acquired brand of pain medication, Tylenol. For the past few years, Tylenol had been sold at a higher price than its competitors, but Burke was able to influence executive management into lowering the price, a decision that ultimately made Tylenol the number one-selling pain reliever in America by 1976 (Alonso, 2022).

According to Harvard Business School professor Joseph Bower, Burke's tenure as CEO was one of the best in Johnson & Johnson's CEO history: "We talk about 'values-driven companies' — that's what J&J was under Burke...there are people who think that large corporations are not toys to be traded in the market but are institutions to be built on and improved. If you did what was right, you made money" (Bower, 2012 as cited in Brown, 2012). Today, Burke's achievements during his time as CEO are still studied in business schools across America, including Harvard Business School. Perhaps Burke's most studied achievement is his monumental crisis communication response and strategy during the 1982 poisonings and subsequent deaths of seven Chicagoians after they ingested extra-strength Tylenol capsules - the very brand that Burke helped to launch during his early years as CEO. By referring to Johnson & Johnson's coveted credo throughout the crisis, Burke made the decision to choose consumers over revenue and, in making that decision, set a major crisis communication precedence.

After Burke retired as CEO in 1989, Johnson & Johnson experienced a series of CEO changes from that year to 2024. From 1989-2002, CEO Ralph Larsen led the company, and



under his leadership, Johnson & Johnson department employees developed the first minimally invasive surgical procedures and the first coronary stent (Johnson & Johnson UK). In 2002, William Weldon was appointed as CEO - during his tenure, the first talcum powder-related ovarian cancer lawsuit was quietly filed against Johnson & Johnson in 2009, beginning the company's long, tumultuous battle with talcum-related litigation. Alex Gorsky was appointed CEO in 2012, and, recently, Joaquin Duato was made CEO in 2022, serving as the company's current CEO. From 1989 (when Burke retired) to 2024, which is 35 years, Johnson & Johnson has undergone four CEO changes - comparing that to 1931 - 1976 (the year Burke was appointed as CEO), another 35-year timeframe, the company had experienced only two CEO changes. Current crisis matters faced by Johnson & Johnson include accusations of severe blood clots resulting from their Covid-19 vaccine and boosters, and ongoing lawsuits as part of the talcum powder crisis.

## CASE STUDY ONE: 1982 TYLENOL CONTAMINATION CRISIS

### Background of the Crisis

Tylenol, pictured below, is a pain-reliever and fever-reducer medication with the chemical compound acetaminophen as the active ingredient.



**Figure 5: Tylenol Extra-Strength Tablets (Tylenol)**

In 1955, American company McNeil Laboratories was the first to launch the Tylenol brand into the market - their first product was a syrup for children (West). As the Tylenol brand expanded and began to add more products into its catalog, McNeil Laboratories was acquired by Johnson & Johnson in 1959 (Alonso, 2022). Under Johnson & Johnson, Tylenol products such as Tylenol with codeine, adult regular-strength tablets, and children's chewable tablets were developed and sold in international markets (West). In 1975, Tylenol extra-strength capsules became available for the first time, and the product was joined by extra-strength tablets in 1976 (West). With the

launch of Tylenol's extra-strength products came the best year as a brand that Tylenol had ever seen - in July 1976, Tylenol became the best-selling and most popular brand of over-the-counter pain relievers in the United States, and its popularity only increased in subsequent years (West).

On September 29, 1982, 12-year-old Mary Kellerman's parents gave her an extra-strength Tylenol capsule for her sore throat - within minutes after taking the Tylenol capsule, Kellerman was dead (Markel, 2014). Over the next few days, this phenomenon extended to six other people within the Chicago area: Adam Janus, Stanley Janus, Theresa Janus, Mary McFarland, Paula Prince, and Mary Weiner, who all died after taking the same Tylenol capsules (Markel, 2014) In early October 1982, Chicago investigators were able to connect the seven unexplained deaths with ingesting Tylenol extra-strength capsules. Even worse, the investigators concluded that these people had died because the capsules they took were contaminated with cyanide, a deadly chemical that, when ingested in high amounts, will immediately cause death (Markel, 2014). After this information was released to the public, fear gripped the nation - ultimately, it was determined that the capsules had been laced with cyanide after they had left the manufacturing facility (Markel, 2014). An individual person had gone to stores that sold Tylenol extra-strength capsules, opened a few containers, and opened the capsules to put cyanide powder into them - it was a criminal case against this person, not a negligence case against Johnson & Johnson (Harris et al., 2002). However, right after the poisonings occurred, nobody knew this information (Markel, 2014); until they could get answers, CEO James Burke had to decide exactly how to handle this unprecedented crisis.

The researcher next searched prior literature about the Tylenol crisis, which corresponded to each CERC framework principle, including response time, accuracy, credibility, having empathy, promotion of actions, and respectfulness.

## **CERC Principle 1. Response Time**

According to the literature, Johnson & Johnson took extremely swift actions in managing the crisis. In early October 1982, when media sources reported the findings of the Tylenol poisonings investigators, Johnson & Johnson executives had no idea that the poisonings even occurred - in the days before fast, accessible news via social media and 24-hour news networks, people were made aware of newsworthy events during the evening or morning news or, in Johnsons & Johnson's case, when a reporter contacted an organization for commentary on a situation that involved them (Harris et al., 2002). After Johnson & Johnson's assistant public relations director Robert Andrews received a call about the deaths from a local reporter, he immediately involved Johnson & Johnson's CEO at the time, James Burke, in the ensuing response-development process (Harris et al., 2002). Burke immediately formed a strategy team to figure out how to 1) save consumers and 2) save the product (Harris et al., 2002).

According to Rutgers University professor and seasoned national news commentator Steve Adubato, within hours of hearing about the Tylenol deaths, organized a crisis team led by the creator of Johnson & Johnson's public relations department, Lawrence Foster. (Adubato, 2008). In the early days of the crisis, Burke and Foster led all communications efforts to let the public know of the situation quickly as possible, including organizing an immediate press conference and inviting national news organizations to attend and appearing on high-traffic national news programs, like *60 Minutes* and *Donahue* (Adubato, 2008). Eventually, Johnson & Johnson hired public relations firm Burson-Marsteller, now known as Burson Cohn & Wolfe, to help with the crisis management and recovery process (Smith, 2010). Working with the firm's co-founder, Harold Burson, Burke reached out to nationwide media outlets and asked them to tell consumers not to take any Tylenol products (even though contamination was found to be

localized to extra-strength capsule bottles) and to continue to not take them until the tampering mystery had been solved (Harris et al., 2002), as seen below.



**Figure 6: New York City-Area Drugstore Employee Removing Tylenol From Shelves**  
(Yvonne Hemsey/Getty Images)

He even worked with Chicago-area law enforcement officers to alert Chicagoians not to buy any Tylenol products by having police officers drive around neighborhoods and use bullhorns to make this announcement as well as having officers positioned outside pharmacy stores and other stores that sold Tylenol and inform people walking into the stores of this alert (L. Westbrook, class presentation, October 11, 2023). All of these actions occurred within weeks of the reporter's phone call to Johnson & Johnson in early October 1982 - according to Harris et al., a post-crisis study conducted by Johnson & Johnson found that over 90% of Americans knew about the Tylenol situation only one week after the crisis began (Harris et al., 2002), demonstrating just how quickly Johnson & Johnson acted.

## **CERC Principle 2. Accuracy**

In order to ensure that all information shared to the public was accurate, Johnson & Johnson worked with the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) in communicating with the public and providing updates on the crisis situation. David Collins, the chairman of McNeil Consumer Products (the manufacturer of Tylenol owned by Johnson & Johnson), explained (as cited in Gutowski, 2022) that it was necessary for the FDA to share information with the public in conjunction with Johnson & Johnson because of the nature of the FDA - as a government agency, all FDA procedures are extremely regulated, and any information they share publicly is seen as truthful. It was particularly necessary for the FDA to confirm that the cyanide contamination came from a third-party and not from Johnson & Johnson manufacturing process, which was something that was speculated after lab testing confirmed the presence of cyanide in Tylenol extra-strength bottles but had not been fully confirmed by the FDA yet (Collins, as cited in Gutowski, 2022). Johnson & Johnson publicly claiming that the cyanide contamination did not originate from their manufacturing facilities was one thing, but having confirmation of this by the FDA further proved Johnson & Johnson's claim (Collins, as cited in Gutowski, 2022). On October 1, 1982, an FDA spokesperson made an appearance on one of the highest-rated television news programs in the nation, *Nightline*, and "shot down the possibility that the tampering took place at McNeil Consumer Products plants" (Gutowski, 2022). After a further examination by the FDA of Tylenol manufacturing facilities, the FDA double-downed on its announcement on *Nightline* and confirmed that the contamination did not originate from the manufacturing sites, much to the relief of Johnson & Johnson (Gutowski, 2022). Throughout various press conferences and statements during the crisis, Johnson & Johnsons spokespeople remained "poised, confident, and media-savvy" (Adubato, 2008), making sure the information

that they were sharing to consumers was correct. An example of this is when Johnson & Johnsons spokesperson Lawrence Foster issued the initial statement that there had been no cyanide found in the manufacturing plants - the *Associated Press* heard rumors that there, in fact, had been cyanide discovered in the plants, so they reached out to Foster to confirm this, which he denied (Adubato, 2008). Apparently, though, the FDA had found small amounts of cyanide in one of the facilities, but it was kept separate from the production lines and was not able to contaminate any products (Adubato, 2008). However, Foster realized he - inadvertently - had not been completely honest with the *Associated Press*, so he reached out to them to clarify his response in order to maintain complete accuracy (Adubato, 2008).

### **CERC Principle 3. Credibility**

Johnson & Johnson implemented several tactics within their crisis communication response to build trust between the company and their consumers. Prior to the Tylenol crisis, when major corporations had become embroiled in nationwide crisis situations, oftentimes the CEO or executive management would either try to brush the situation under the rug or implement a few crisis protocols but not enough to show that the company truly cared about the people whom the crisis affected (L. Westbrook, class presentation, October 11, 2023). However, CEO James Burke took a different route: in adherence to Johnson & Johnson's credo, Burke and other executive employees decided to take a consumer-centric approach in their crisis management strategy, since the first responsibility listed in the credo is a responsibility to consumers (Sonenshein, 2005). Burke and his team understood the importance of consumer safety, especially when there was so much uncertainty within the early stages of the crisis - because of this, Johnson & Johnson issued a nationwide recall of not just Tylenol extra-strength capsules but all Tylenol capsule products, costing the company nearly \$100 million (Sonenshein,

2005). In Burke's words, the company was officially "out of the capsule business" (L. Westbrook, class presentation, October 11, 2023). This was the first mass recall in American history, with a total of 31 million bottles being removed from store shelves across the country, and it led to a decline in Johnson & Johnson's stock value and market share, which decreased from 37% prior to the crisis to just 7% in subsequent months (Gutowski, 2022). The recall did nothing to save the product or the company's revenue (it did quite the opposite of that), but the decision for a mass recall was not intended to help the company - it was intended to put the consumers and their safety before anything else. Although Burke's strict adherence to the credo initially was not a popular decision with all Johnson & Johnson stakeholders, it certainly had positive effects in the fullness of time (Sonenshein, 2005).

According to Rice University business management professor Scott Sonenshein, Johnson & Johnson's implementation of their credo in an unprecedented crisis scenario is "frequently used as an example in business ethics research because it demonstrates how an organization acted in a socially responsible manner by adhering to its values" (Sonenshein, 2005). Perhaps the biggest result of the Tylenol crisis was Johnson & Johnson's development of "triple-sealed packaging" for Tylenol bottles, involving a seal over the opening of the bottle, a seal on the bottle's neck, and a glue seal on the box that held the bottle (L. Westbrook, class presentation, October 11, 2023). This triple-sealed packaging was the first of its kind - prior to that, there were no sealing regulations for medication bottles, which is how the Tylenol capsules were contaminated in the first place (L. Westbrook, class presentation, October 11, 2023).





**Figure 7: Tylenol New Packaging Advertisement (Johnson & Johnson)**

The new packaging was created after consumers expressed that they would feel safer if Tylenol pills had more protection, so the introduction of the triple-sealed packaging increased consumer trust in the brand and helped to rebuild consumer relations in the later stages of the crisis (L. Westbrook, class presentation, October 11, 2023). Additionally, Johnson & Johnson introduced a new pill product, called the “caplet”, which was a small, solid pill and was not as easy to tamper with as the capsules were (Markel, 2014). All of this was done in the interest of protecting consumers, building credibility and trust between Johnson & Johnson and consumers throughout the duration of the crisis.

#### **CERC Principle 4. Having Empathy**

According to Harris et al., Johnson & Johnson felt strongly for the families of the cyanide poisoning victims, especially since they were victims of an unfortunate tragedy that the company seemingly could not have prevented from occurring (Harris et al., 2002). One empathy tactic that Johnson & Johnson implemented was providing financial assistance to victims’ families in order to help these families with the unexpected burden of paying for funerals and memorial services (Harris et al., 2002). Additionally, Johnson & Johnson also provided counseling services to these

families (Harris et al., 2002), something that can be helpful for people who are experiencing life-changing events, such as the death of a loved one.

### **CERC Principle 5. Promotion of Actions**

Within the first few days of the crisis, Johnson & Johnson provided several tasks for the public to complete. First, the company created a twenty-four hour hotline number that concerned people could call if they wanted to learn facts and updates about the Tylenol situation - Johnson & Johnson promoted this hotline to the public, giving the public a meaningful task to complete for their safety (Aduvato, 2008). In addition, Johnson & Johnson advertised in newspapers nationwide that concerned consumers could go to any store and exchange their Tylenol capsule bottles for Tylenol tablets, which had been tested and cleared of any cyanide contamination (Aduvato, 2008). Mentioned in the earlier “response time” section, Johnson & Johnson worked with local news stations and law enforcement to let the public know not to take any Tylenol products until the origin of the contamination was confirmed and to take Tylenol products currently in their possession back to stores as part of the company’s recall efforts. Even though these actions were done quickly, making them an excellent example of quick response time, these actions also demonstrate promotion of actions as Johnson & Johnson developed them specifically for consumers to complete.

### **CERC Principle 6. Respectfulness**

Across the literature, multiple scholars included examples of Johnson & Johnson successfully adhering to the response time, accuracy, credibility, empathy, and promotion of actions principles of CERC. However, there are not as many examples of how Johnson & Johnson adhered to specifically the respectfulness principle. Through their actions in adherence to the other principles, though, it is clear that the company was respectful of consumers,

especially through their commitment to putting the consumers first in their crisis responses. Harris et al., notes, however, that there was one downfall of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication strategies: prior to the crisis, the only relationship the company had with the media was through advertising and marketing (Harris et al., 2002). Because of this, one of Johnson & Johnson's media tactics during the crisis was running sales-like advertisements in order to try and rebuild Tylenol's reputation as America's #1 over-the-counter pain reliever (Harris et al., 2002). The media heavily criticized this tactic - they did not view it as appropriate or respectful of the current situation (Harris et al., 2002). However, with James Burke's personable and charming messages to the media, the company was able to overcome this issue (Harris et al., 2002).

Decades later, a new crisis emerged: in 2018, Johnson & Johnson was slammed with tens of thousands of lawsuits filed by women who claimed that the company's talcum-based Baby Powder cause their ovarian cancer (majority ovarian - there have been a few cases related to lung cancer, specifically mesothelioma). Using various crisis communication responses, Johnson & Johnson managed, and is still managing to this day, this crisis situation, which the researcher will analyze using secondary sources.

## CASE STUDY TWO: JOHNSON & JOHNSON TALCUM POWDER CRISIS

### Background of the Crisis

On December 4, 2009, a recently-diagnosed ovarian cancer patient, Deane Berg, filed a lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson alleging that their talcum-based powder product, called “Baby Powder”, was the cause of her cancer. According to Johnson & Johnson, Baby Powder was first launched in 1894 as one of the company’s first products (Johnson & Johnson). At the time (and up until 2023), the powder was made of ground talc, a naturally-occurring mineral found in various places across the world (Girion, 2018), as pictured below.



**Figure 8: Solid and Grinded Talc (Serina Trading)**

Initially, the powder’s intended purpose was to soothe diaper rashes on babies (Girion, 2018) - later, in the 20th century, Johnson & Johnson began marketing Baby Powder to women, claiming that, when applied to the vaginal area, the powder would reduce any odors and chafing (Cep, 2022). In 2007, when researching potential causes of her ovarian cancer, Berg came across

talcum powder as a possible cause, which was significant since Baby Powder (pictured below) was something Berg used everyday (Cep, 2022).



**Figure 9: Johnson & Johnson's Baby Powder (Jens Mortensen)**

Intrigued by this possibility, Berg asked about talcum powder in an online ovarian cancer forum, and she was answered by a Mississippi-based lawyer, R. Allen Smith, Jr. (Cep, 2022). For years, Smith, Jr. had been researching the potential cancerous effects of Baby Powder, and it was discovered that “the evidence against talc had grown substantial enough by the time Berg was diagnosed that many U.S. manufacturers, including the makers of crayons, condoms, and surgical gloves, had erred on the side of caution and stopped using it in their products” (Cep, 2022). In 2009, Berg had her ovaries examined for any talc contamination, and doctors discovered traces of talc in one of her ovaries - Smith, Jr. finally had enough evidence for a lawsuit, so he filed one on behalf of Berg in December 2009 (Cep, 2022).

However, the reason why Berg found talcum powder as a potential carcinogen was not because of the talc itself. By the late 2000s, the World Health Organization had declared that,

when mined, talc had often been found growing near the minerals actinolite, anthophyllite, chrysotile, and tremolite - collectively known as asbestos - and that talc contaminated with these minerals was a known carcinogen (Cep, 2022). In a famous 2018 exposé piece by *Reuters* reporter Lisa Girion (2018), it was revealed that Johnson & Johnson knew since the early 1970s their talcum powder was contaminated with asbestos, but the company never brought this concern to the Food and Drug Administration. In July 2018, state attorneys ordered Johnson & Johnson to pay nearly \$4.7 billion to cancer victims, leading to an escalation in lawsuits against the company (Buntz, 2023). Johnson & Johnson finally decided to cease the selling of their talcum-based Baby Powder in North America in May 2020 (Buntz, 2023), five decades after they first discovered asbestos contamination within their powder.

Once in 2021 and twice in 2023, faced with mounting settlement costs, the company worth over \$350 billion (New York Stock Exchange) filed for bankruptcy. Johnson & Johnson's bankruptcy strategy was ruled improper by an appeals court in January 2023, but the company once again filed for bankruptcy in July 2023, which was also rejected by the court's judge (Buntz, 2023).

On September 13, 2023 a United States House of Representatives committee, called the Committee on Oversight and Accountability, formally questioned Johnson & Johnson executives about the legitimacy of the talc powder lawsuits (Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi, 2023). During this questioning, Representative Raja Krishnamoorthi (2023) revealed that the committee's investigative report agreed with the findings of the *Reuters* article, that "there were, indeed, carcinogens in [Johnson & Johnson's] talc, that there was merits to Reuters' allegations, and that FDA testing was inadequate to determine its presence." Representative Krishnamoorthi

(2023) also stated that Johnson & Johnson was given the opportunity to testify at this questioning but that they had declined the offer.

In August 2022, Johnson & Johnson announced plans to stop global production of talc-based Baby Powder and to begin the introduction of cornstarch-based Baby Powder (Buntz, 2023); as of April 2024, cornstarch-based Baby Powder is now available worldwide. In January 2024, Johnson & Johnson reached a final settlement agreement with 43 state attorney generals of \$700 million (Gibson, 2024); as of April 2024, the company has yet to pay this settlement.

The researcher next searched prior literature about the Tylenol crisis, which corresponded to each CERC framework principle, including response time, accuracy, credibility, having empathy, promotion of actions, and respectfulness

### **CERC Principle 1. Response Time**

In May 2016, nearly seven years after the first lawsuit was filed against the company, Johnson & Johnson released a statement on their website, which was titled “A Message about talc”. Within this statement, Johnson and Johnson stated the following about their use of talcum powder in their Baby Powder product: “And today, we continue to manufacture and sell JOHNSON’S® Baby Powder with talc because we remain completely confident in its safety. We remain committed to safety and innovation, and will continue to work hard to exceed consumer expectations and evolving product preferences.” This statement also claims that Johnson & Johnson rigorously tested their talc in the 1980s and found that their talc was completely safe to use in addition to referencing multiple recent studies conducted which found no correlation between ovarian cancer and talc usage (Johnson & Johnson).

Additionally, Johnson & Johnson also released a media statement stating their intent to appeal a 2016 verdict in which the jury ruled in favor of the plaintiff, who was one of many

women suing the company for ovarian cancer damages. Johnson & Johnson's next statement on the talcum powder crisis was made by a global media relations executive, Carol Goodrich, in March 2017, when a judge in St. Louis rejected a suit filed by a woman who claimed that using Baby Powder caused her ovarian cancer - in addition to this, a New Jersey judge rejected two similar cases made in 2016, which was also mentioned in the statement (Johnson & Johnson). In this statement, the company said that the dismissal of these cases is "consistent with the science, research, clinical evidence and decades of studies by medical experts around the world that continue to support the safety of cosmetic talc" and it "highlights the lack of credible scientific evidence behind plaintiffs' allegations" (Goodrich, 2017). In December 2018, Johnson & Johnson responded after *Reuters* published its incriminating exposé, with the company claiming that the article contained false information and, therefore, had misled the public (Johnson & Johnson). In addition to these three statements, Johnson & Johnson has made statements following nearly every major jury decision in civil cases filed against them since August 2019 - these statements have been posted on a website Johnson & Johnson created just for talc-related safety, news, and litigation information, called "Facts About Talc", which was created in 2018. This is nearly nine years after the initial lawsuit was first filed in 2009. Perhaps the biggest example of slow response time is the company's financial responses to the litigation matters itself - over the past 15 years, Johnson & Johnson has not settled any damages owed to winning plaintiffs; in January 2024, the company finally worked with attorney generals from 43 states and reached a deal to pay a total of \$700 million in order to resolve all claims (Gibson, 2024).

### **CERC Principle 2. Accuracy**

The accuracy of Johnson & Johnson's statements and actions have come into question, especially by *Reuters* reporter Lisa Girion. During her research for the article, Girion (2018)



found evidence that Johnson & Johnson had known since the early 1970s that their talc at the time, supplied by companies in Italy and America, contained trace amounts of asbestos minerals. In three different tests conducted by independent lab organizations from 1972-1975, each test concluded that trace amounts of minerals known as asbestos in their fibrous form were found in provided Baby Powder samples (Girion, 2018). These findings were immediately reported to Johnson & Johnson each time, as the scientists conducting the tests were concerned about the effects of asbestos contamination in the company's product, which millions of women bought everyday to use on their children and on themselves (Girion , 2018). At the time, the Baby Powder product was labeled as a cosmetic product, and, in the United States, cosmetic products are not subjected to strict Food & Drug Administration (FDA) regulations like other product groups are (Berfield et al., 2016). However, Girion (2018) explained that in 1972, President Richard Nixon developed a new government organization called the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and this organization's first regulation was setting limits on asbestos exposure in the workplace, so there were some governmental regulations beginning to take effect around the time that Johnson & Johnson found out that their talc samples were contaminated with asbestos. According to the article, Johnson & Johnson unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the FDA in 1974 that talc with only 1% asbestos contamination was within the tolerable asbestos limits set by OSHA, with one FDA official quoted as saying that "no mother was going to powder her baby with 1% of a known carcinogen irregardless of the large safety factor" (Girion, 2018). Additionally, Johnson & Johnson neglected to tell the FDA about two additional contamination tests conducted on their powder samples in 1974 and 1975 had both come back as positive for contamination, with one reporting "rather high" levels of asbestos fibers (Girion, 2018). On the other hand, though, Girion (2018) does state that separate

tests conducted by the FDA did not find any trace amounts of asbestos in Johnson & Johnson's talcum powder samples.

Throughout the talcum powder crisis, Johnson & Johnson has continued to deny that its powder has, or ever had, any asbestos contamination, directly contradicting the findings in Girion's article. In their 2018 statement about the article, the company focuses on talc itself as the issue, reiterating multiple times and providing statistics from multiple studies that talc does not cause cancer. However, that is not the correct issue at hand - the correct issue is that talc contaminated with asbestos can cause cancer. Additionally, Johnson & Johnson heavily stresses that the current mine from which they source their asbestos - located in China - has repeatedly shown no traces of asbestos contamination, but this was not the point of the article - the point of the article was to reveal that the company's powder did, at some point in time, contain asbestos fibers. At the end of their statement, Johnson & Johnson claim that they tried several times to provide commentary for the *Reuters* article but was met with refusal from *Reuters* each time; however, in the article, Girion (2018) claims that Johnson & Johnson was contacted for commentary but that they had "declined to comment further for this article".

In their 2016 "A Message about talc" statement, Johnson & Johnson writes the following about talc: "...various governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as other expert panels have reviewed and analyzed all available data, and none have concluded that talc can cause cancer" (Johnson & Johnson). However, this is not necessarily true; according to Cep, the "World Health Organization's (WHO) International Agency for Research on Cancer had designated talc containing fibrous particles a carcinogen and the genital application of any talc powder possibly carcinogenic" by the late 2000s (Cep, 2022). The WHO is a governmentally-recognized organization created by the United Nations, and countries around the world

(including the United States) adhere to WHO recommendations in order to protect the safety and health of their citizens (World Health Organization). Any reports released by this organization can be viewed as “expert”, which seemingly contradicts Johnson & Johnson’s aforementioned statement.

### **CERC Principle 3. Credibility**

After the *Reuters* article was released, Johnson & Johnson attempted to address public concern and rebuild consumer trust. The company created an advertisement that includes a simple image of a Baby Powder bottle and the following statement:

“The talc in Johnson’s Baby Powder is the purest, safest pharmaceutical-grade talc on earth. It doesn’t contain asbestos and never will. We test every single lot to ensure it. The FDA has tested Johnson’s talc since the ‘70s and has confirmed - every single time - that it did not contain asbestos. We have always cooperated fully and openly with the FDA and other regulators and have given them full access to our talc testing results. We did not hide anything. Ever. Our openness and collaboration with the FDA and regulatory agencies is well documented. We have always acted with the utmost transparency in this matter. Nothing is more important to us than the health and safety of our customers. We’re parents and grandparents, just like you. If we had any reason to believe our talc was unsafe, it would be off our shelves immediately. There is irrefutable scientific evidence that our talc is safe and beneficial to use. Go to [factsaboutalc.com](http://factsaboutalc.com). There you’ll find independent studies from leading universities, research from medical journals, and third-party opinions, so you can learn the facts and make up your own mind.” (Johnson & Johnson, 2018).

Additionally, the company created the website *Facts About Talc*, briefly mentioned in the “Response Time” section of this case study. As stated in the advertisement, *Facts About Talc*

include several reputable studies and scholarly articles that position talc as safe to use - offering scientific data is a great way to build credibility because consumers are likely to trust science-based findings (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). Johnson & Johnson also published a blog post on their website listing the many discrepancies and misinformation included in the *Reuters* article and explaining the facts from the company's perspective.

Despite Johnson & Johnson's efforts, many consumers expressed on social media their disappointment in the company and that they had completely stopped trusting Johnson & Johnson. The company faced severe backlash on X (formerly Twitter) when they posted the following statement on the safety of talc shortly after the article was published: "Johnson's Baby Powder has the purest, safest pharmaceutical-grade talc on earth. Learn more at <http://factsabouttalc.com>" (Johnson & Johnson, 2018), along with an image of their new advertisement. In the comment section of that post, user Kimber (2018) said the following: "You killed my mom. She used your product every single day...and you KNEW you were poisoning people. She should be here today but because of you, she's not." Another user, Cheri Wilson (2018), asked "why are you lying?", and user Apartheid Clyde (2018) made this comment: "I trusted Johnson & Johnson my whole life. A company I had faith in. I will never buy another product of yours again." Out of 123 replies to Johnson & Johnson's post, the overwhelming majority of them expressed distrust, upset, and accusatory statements. Johnson & Johnson did respond to a few comments - the company even provided their direct phone number to user Kimber and asked them to call so that they could all discuss her accusation in more detail (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). In 2022, when Johnson & Johnson announced its decision to stop manufacturing talcum-based Baby Powder, social media news group The Shade Room posted this on their Instagram page, prompting comments like the following: "Too [late]. We already

moved on to other brands” (Lindsey, 2022); “All this time and they still never changed it even though we all know it is cancer causing substances. Shows how [much] they “care” about your health...” (Suzanne, 2022); and “How about we just don’t support those brands that knowingly have products with toxic chemicals. That will teach them to have good quality products.” (@porcelainmj, 2022). Based on these social media posts, the public clearly was losing trust in Johnson & Johnson, and the responses Johnson & Johnson gave did little to remedy this.

To the company’s slight credit, though, Berfield et al. (2016) notes that, when talc-based Baby Powder was still being sold, Johnson & Johnson did provide a warning label on the packaging advising against inhalation and that the powder should be used for external areas only. However, there has never been a warning label about the potential ovarian cancer risks - this was something that was brought up as a potential remediation during Deane Berg’s lawsuit, but Berg later discovered that Johnson & Johnson was never planning to include a cancer warning on their Baby Powder packaging (Cep, 2022). Instead, Berg was told by company lawyers that the money that the company was to award her was dependent “on her never saying that Baby Powder had caused her cancer” (Johnson & Johnson said never that this never happened) (Cep, 2022).

#### **CERC Principle 4. Having Empathy**

Within several of their responses posted to their website throughout the crisis, Johnson & Johnson has expressed sympathy for victims of ovarian cancer. In their 2016 “A Message about talc” statement, Johnson & Johnson wrote the following: “Everyone at Johnson & Johnson sympathizes deeply with the women and families who have been affected by ovarian cancer, a devastating disease with no known cause. We know the women and families affected are searching for answers and want to understand the science.” In their 2017 response to the three dismissed litigation cases, Johnson & Johnson included the following statement: “We deeply

sympathize with the women and families impacted by ovarian cancer.” Within their advertisement, the company used empathetic language, being sure to include the pronouns “we” and “our” in reference to the consumers (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). In particular, they included this sentence :“We’re parents and grandparents, just like you.” This sentence positions Johnson & Johnson on the same emotional level as their consumers and states one big thing that they all have in common - they all have a family, specifically children whom they love and care for.

However, Johnson & Johnson has continually dismissed the idea that their Baby Powder product causes ovarian cancer, even though there is scientific evidence that suggests this. To people suffering from the unimaginable pain of cancer, the company’s dismissal most likely does not feel empathetic.

#### **CERC Principle 5. Promotion of Actions**

According to available literature, Johnson & Johnson does not seem to utilize this principle much in their crisis communication responses. As cited in this case study’s previous sections, the company did direct consumers to their *Facts About Talc* website in order to learn more about talc, which is promoting an action. In 2019, Johnson & Johnson issued a recall of their talc-based Baby Powder product for one lot in the United States after a sample from that lot tested positive for asbestos contamination, and they advised consumers to discontinue their use of the product if their bottle came from the contaminated lot (Food and Drug Administration, 2019). An interesting note is that Johnson & Johnson has been selling a cornstarch-based Baby Powder product since 1980, which was sold in addition to their talcum-based powder (Girion, 2018). However, within their communication responses, Johnson & Johnson largely did not promote the use of this powder over their talcum-based powder - although, it would seem like a good idea to promote the alternate powder product in the face of all the potentially harmful

effects of their talcum-based product. Nevertheless, Johnson & Johnson began selling only the cornstarch-based powder in 2023, and as of April 2024 the talcum-based powder is no longer available for consumer purchase.

### **CERC Principle 6. Respectfulness**

Similar to the Tylenol case, certain levels of respect can be seen in the company's responses throughout the crisis. As stated earlier in the analysis of the respectfulness principle, a company showing respect is the company recognizing that affected consumers are each individual people who were each individually affected by the crisis, and they should be treated as such (Waters, 2018). Based on the current literature, there seems to be little evidence that Johnson & Johnson reached out to plaintiffs suffering from cancer and their families or to concerned consumers. However, Johnson & Johnson did personally respond to concerned comments on their X posts, as cited in the "Credibility" section of this case study. On the other hand, Johnson & Johnson's bankruptcy strategies have played a large role in extending the litigation process, preventing plaintiffs, all suffering from cancer, from suing in the first place and collecting the damages that the company owes to them (Knauth, 2024). Perhaps the company's most telling example of how respectful they have been, though, is their lawyers' interaction with Deane Berg, cited in the "Credibility" section, in which the lawyers essentially dismissed her entire case by telling her to never reveal that Baby Powder caused her cancer. A possible, yet substantial, reason as to why Johnson & Johnson has not acted more respectfully towards plaintiffs is because they genuinely do not believe, based on their various statements, that their talcum-based Baby Powder is what caused any of the plaintiffs' ovarian cancers (Johnson & Johnson)

## **Application and Comparison of Case Studies and Overarching Research Questions**

This thesis has analyzed secondary sources in a literature review and format in order to understand what the literature says about Johnson & Johnson's application of CERC principles in their crisis communication responses to the 1982 Tylenol crisis and the ongoing talcum powder crisis. In addition to this, this thesis seeks to understand Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses through the perspective of real-world communications professionals and through the perspective of integrated marketing communications (IMC) students at the University of Mississippi. During their career, communications professionals often handle and develop strategies and plans for crisis situations (Pinkowska, 2024), so they have a certain crisis expertise that other communications professionals do not have. As for IMC students, IMC coursework includes crisis communication case studies and classes, so students of this major have already been exposed to best-practice crisis communication strategies and successful crisis communication cases. Therefore, gathering and analyzing insights from these two groups of people will best answer the following research questions:

**RQ1: How did the crisis response for each case study align with the six CERC principles outlined by the CDC?**

**RQ2: How do communications professionals describe the two Johnson & Johnson case studies explored in this thesis?**

**RQ3: What valuable crisis communication insights were gained from IMC students' real-time vocalizations based on AI-generated crisis response synopses?**



## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was reviewed by the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board. The purpose of this section is to describe the primary research methods used to analyze professionals and students' views on Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses. Three different methods were used to conduct this primary research - case study methodology, in-depth interviews with a semi-structured interview guide, and the think-aloud protocol (student interviews only).

### **Case Study Methodology**

A case study is a qualitative research method that involves an in-depth exploration and analysis of a particular topic or subject (Zainal, 2007). In research, it can be used to investigate individual people, groups of people, an organization, or a singular phenomenon or event (Zainal, 2007). A large advantage of the case study approach is that the descriptive accounts gathered by the researcher from their research subjects provides opportunities to analyze real-world information from real-world subjects, as opposed to analyzing one-dimensional information gathered from experimental or survey research (Zainal, 2007).

For the Tylenol and talcum powder case studies, the researcher chose to thoroughly analyze secondary sources encompassing perspectives from varying stakeholders - these sources included government reports, news articles, social media posts, Johnson & Johnson publications, and scholarly journal articles. Even though case studies are classified as primary research,

examining secondary sources can be beneficial for case studies involving past events, like the Tylenol crisis and most of the talcum powder crisis (Awasthi and Gopakumar, 2023).

Additionally, the researcher interviewed communications professionals and University of Mississippi IMC students in order to gather informed perspectives on Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses during the two crises, helping to answer RQ2 and RQ3.

## **Interviews**

Approval was obtained from the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB), and interviews were conducted via Zoom and in person. The researcher conducted interviews with five communications professionals, who will remain anonymous in this paper and will be referred to as only Professional 1, Professional 2, Professional 3, Professional 4 and Professional 5. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. In total, the researcher analyzed 150 total number of minutes of interview transcripts from the sessions with communications professionals. The research took thorough notes during each interview. In addition, the researcher interviewed 10 University of Mississippi IMC students, who will remain anonymous in this paper and will be referred to as only Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4, Student 5, Student 6, Student 7, Student 8, Student 9, and Student 10. Interviews lasted an average of 10 minutes. In total, the researcher analyzed 100 total number of minutes of interview transcripts from the sessions with IMC students. The research took thorough notes during each interview.

These groups of people were chosen because they both understand best-practice crisis communication strategies and responses and the proper principles to implement during a crisis situation. During their careers, all five professionals interviewed had communicatively managed a crisis situation, and they were able to apply their expertise and knowledge to the communication responses of two Johnson & Johnson cases. Additionally, at the University of

Mississippi, IMC is the major that includes public relations and crisis communications, and IMC students are exposed to crisis communications case studies and best-practice techniques during their time in the major. Thus, all IMC students interviewed were able to analyze the success of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses through utilizing their education gained in the IMC program.

Interviewees were recruited via email messages, direct messages over text, and verbal recruitment. All interviews utilized a semi-structured guide, but the researcher chose to incorporate the think aloud protocol in student interviews.

### **Think Aloud Protocol**

The "think aloud" method is a qualitative research technique in which research subjects are asked to speak their thoughts aloud while completing a task (Vygotsky, 1962 as cited in Bradshaw, 2022). This technique is able to reveal the pure, uninterpreted thoughts of research subjects, leading to a deeper and more holistic understanding of insights gathered by the researcher (Güss, 2018). The researcher decided to utilize the think aloud method within student interviews only because of the nature of the student interviews: student interviews were conducted in-person, while most of the professionals interviewed were able to meet virtually only. In-person interviews allow for physical observation in addition to regular notation of the interviewees' responses - because of this, the researcher was able to capture the entire essence of in-person interviewees' reactions and responses versus those of Zoom interviewees. Additionally, communications professionals have amassed decades of experience in communications fields and have a vast amount of knowledge to apply in considering the responses of Johnson & Johnson. On the other hand, students do not: they need additional context about the responses of each crisis, especially the Tylenol case since it occurred years

before the students were born. The think aloud protocol allows the researcher to provide the students with helpful crisis synopses and to gather their thoughts in real-time. Thus, student interviews provided a better format to which the think aloud method could be applied.

### **Procedure - Professionals**

Before the start of the interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study utilizing an informational fact sheet (Appendix #1) about the study as a means of interviewee consent. Each interviewee consented to their interview Using the informed consent form required by IRB.

To record an interview, the researcher first obtained consent from the participants. After the researcher introduced herself and thanked the interviewee for their time, the researcher then utilized a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix #2), approved specifically for professionals, to ask questions throughout the interview. To begin, participants were asked their name and age and about their familiarity with Johnson & Johnson, the Tylenol crisis, the talcum powder crisis, and the six principles of CERC. Each interviewee had varying levels of prior understanding for each case, but they were at least somewhat familiar with the cases and Johnson & Johnson's responses for each one.

From there, the interviewees were asked questions about specific nuances of each CERC principle - specifically questions about how, in their experience, each principle should be properly applied to crisis communication responses. Based upon their responses to these questions, the researcher asked about how they would describe Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses during the Tylenol case in relation to the CERC principles and about their thoughts on what Johnson & Johnson did correctly and incorrectly. Additionally,

interviewees familiar with CEO James Burke's contributions to the Tylenol responses were asked about their thoughts on his role in the crisis.

Then, interviewees were asked the same questions but in relation to the talcum powder crisis. Interviewees were asked about how they would describe Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses during the talcum powder case in relation to the CERC principles and about their thoughts on what Johnson & Johnson did correctly and incorrectly. Similar to the set of Tylenol questions, interviewees familiar with Johnson & Johnson's CEO history were asked if they believe that CEO changes had anything to do with the shift in Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication strategies.

To conclude the interview, interviewees were thanked for their time and told that their responses included in the study would be anonymous.

### **Procedure - Students**

Before the start of the interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study utilizing an informational fact sheet about the study as a means of interviewee consent. Each interviewee consented to their interview.

After the researcher introduced herself and thanked the interviewee for their time, the researcher then utilized a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix #3), approved specifically for students, to ask questions throughout the interview. To begin the interview, the researcher asked the interviewee's age. Then, the researcher asked about their familiarity with the Tylenol crisis and the talcum powder crisis, calling it the "Baby Powder" crisis.

After the students answered these questions, the researcher produced two synopses (Appendix #4 and Appendix #5), one for the Tylenol crisis and one for the talcum powder crisis. The synopses were generated by the artificial intelligence software MagicSchool.ai and were

based on sections of the researcher's analysis of secondary sources related to the Tylenol and talcum powder crises. From the pages of information input by the researcher, MagicSchool.ai was able to create an easily-understandable, one-page synopsis of each crisis, specifically detailing the background of each crisis and Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses.

The researcher asked each interviewee to read the synopses and, while reading, to verbalize any thoughts that they had, which the researcher noted in the response sheet for each interviewee. After the interviewees completed this task, the researcher then produced a summary of the six CERC principles (Appendix #6), which was also generated by MagicSchool.ai from the researcher's literature review on the principles. The researcher asked the interviewees to read the summary and to ask any questions about the summary if necessary.

Finally, the researcher asked the interviewees to think about the six CERC principles (and to reference the summary if needed) and describe how well they thought Johnson & Johnson adhered to those principles within their responses in the Tylenol and talcum powder crises.

To conclude the interview, interviewees were thanked for their time and told that their responses included in the study would be anonymous.

### **Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis is an examination tool that can be utilized to organize and interpret qualitative data (Mishra, 2022). As defined, themes are intangible patterns, expressions, or processes - depending on the type of data gathered - that describe a certain phenomenon (Mishra, 2022). Identifying themes in the data provides a meaningful structure and allows for clear, understandable insights (Mishra, 2022).

In assigning meaning to the interview data, the researcher followed Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-step data analysis process, described as a system for identifying key data themes. During the first phase, the researcher familiarizes themselves with the data, ensuring that they understand the key concepts and contexts of the data (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Next, the researcher generates codes, or meanings from the data sets (Clark and Braun, 2013) - in this study's case, this means examining the interview responses. Then, the researcher combines these meanings into coherent themes, establishing the patterns found within the data sets - from there, the researcher reviews the themes and determines their significance to the research (Clark and Braun, 2013). Finally, the researcher reports their findings. In this study, the researcher compared emergent themes from the professional interviews with themes from the student interviews; further analysis from all interviews conducted revealed multiple overarching themes, described in the subsequent section.

## RESULTS

**To answer RQ1, the researcher thoroughly analyzed secondary sources, including government reports, news articles, social media posts, Johnson & Johnson publications, and scholarly journal articles, related to both the Tylenol crisis and the talcum powder crisis and the responses of Johnson & Johnson to each crisis. The researcher then developed their own interpretation of their analysis of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses for both crises, as seen below.**

### **Case Study One Conclusion**

As seen in this case study, multiple scholars across several disciplines acknowledge that Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication response to the 1982 Tylenol crisis is one of the best and most successful crisis communication response examples in the modern-day. From the perspective of the six CERC principles, it is obvious that Johnson & Johnson adhered to the premises of each principle as best as possible, leading to the successful rebuilding of consumer relations post-crisis and the reestablishment of healthy revenue amounts within just a year of this major crisis situation occurring (Markel, 2014). The company's swift response time, on-point accuracy, credible words and actions, empathetic responses, constant promotion of actions, and respect for consumers demonstrated to the world that not all mass corporations lie their priorities in sales and revenue - some companies, like Johnson & Johnson, truly care about their consumers and will do everything in their power to protect them in times of crisis. From Harvard



Business School to crisis management seminars taught across the world, Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol crisis response leaves a legacy of being one of the most taught case studies of what companies should do during a crisis (L. Westbrook, class presentation, October 11, 2023), and, after analyzing their response, it is clear as to why this is the case.

### **Case Study Two Conclusion**

Based on perspectives and knowledge from multiple scholars, Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses to the talcum powder crisis deeply contrast with their responses to the Tylenol crisis, as analyzed through the six principles of CERC. As outlined in the case study, the company has undergone several changes in leadership from the Tylenol crisis to the ongoing talcum powder crisis, which might have played a role in the drastic differences of their communication responses. During the Tylenol crisis, the company responded quickly, accurately, compassionately, and respectfully, and they implemented several successful crisis communication tactics that helped to rebuild their consumer relations to pre-crisis levels. To contrast, Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses during the talcum powder crisis has been slow, accusatory, not completely correct, and, overall, lacking the success that the company found with their Tylenol responses. Furthermore, during the Tylenol crisis, consumers were able to view Johnson & Johnson as the victim of a cruel crime - the company had nothing to do with the Tylenol-related deaths, so consumers were willing to sympathize with them (Harris et al., 2002). With the talcum powder crisis, however, Johnson & Johnson is the responsible party, and, naturally, people place blame on the responsible party. Additionally, there has been the added element of litigation with the talcum powder case, which is a complex matter in its own right. Even though the talcum powder case might be more difficult to navigate than the Tylenol case, Johnson & Johnson should have still attempted to adhere strictly to the six CERC

principles, developed specifically for healthcare organizations facing a crisis. Ultimately, the company has implemented underwhelming crisis communication responses during this crisis, and it is clear that their responses have negatively impacted their consumer relations.

## **Interviews**

After analyzing the responses of professionals and students to questions asked about the two case studies, the researcher was able to identify two overarching themes stemming from the Tylenol case: “Quick Action” and “Trust.” An additional third theme was identified for the responses of each interview group (professionals and students) in relation to the Tylenol case. For the professionals, the third theme is “Impactful Leadership”, and for the students, the third theme is “Well-Rounded Responses”, which was developed from the students’ think-aloud interview. Additionally, the researcher identified three overarching themes stemming from the talcum powder case: “Dishonesty”, “Slow Response Time”, and “Shifts in Ideals”. A third theme, “Condemnation”, was developed from the students’ think-aloud interview. From there, the researcher examined each theme through the lens of 1) professionals and 2) students, as detailed in the subsequent paragraphs.

**To answer RQ2, interviews with communications professionals were conducted to understand the success of Johnson & Johnson’s crisis communication responses in adherence to the six CERC principles from the perspective of experts in the crisis communication field.** The researcher interviewed five communications professionals: three of these professionals currently or previously worked in healthcare communications, one professional works in crisis communication and issues management, and one professional previously worked with Johnson & Johnson as a consumer researcher and marketing strategist.

## **Themes Regarding the Tylenol Case**

### *Impactful Leadership (Professional Theme Only)*

“Impactful Leadership” refers to the excellent leadership displayed by Johnson & Johnson CEO James Burke during the Tylenol crisis and how his leadership played a significant role in the company’s successful adherence to the CERC principles. In the following quote, Professional 2 recognized the phenomenon of leadership’s values and ideals affecting the way a company operates:

Leadership definitely matters - who the leader is and what their ethics are has a huge effect on operations of a company (personal interview, Professional 2).

Several of the professionals agreed that James Burke’s strict adherence to Johnson & Johnson’s credo, which showcases the company’s value system, was a critical reason as to why the company’s responses were extremely consumer-centric. For instance, Professional 1 noted that Burke’s ideals, along with his personable character, contributed greatly to how the company interacted with consumers throughout the crisis:

Internally, they were very quick to sit down and ask what the company was going to do. Burke took such a strong leadership position in adhering to the credo. His commitment to the credo and being the decent person that he is shown through when dealing with the public. People felt reassured, they felt comforted - he didn’t have to act, he cared about everyone involved in the situation (personal interview, Professional 1).

Additionally, Professional 5 explained the monumental effects of Burke’s involvement in the Tylenol crisis communication responses, as shown in the example below:

The rise of their crisis communications came from Jim Burke. [Johnson & Johnson’s] integrity and adherence to the credo under Burke was the peak of their crisis

communication strategy. He just said, ‘Look, we’re out of the capsule business’, and all the executives and lawyers were trying to tell him to calm down...but it was important to him (personal interview, Professional 5).

Overall, the “Impactful Leadership” theme shows the opinions of professionals of Johnson & Johnson’s effective leadership throughout the Tylenol crisis. The professionals made it clear that company leadership can determine the success of a company’s crisis communication strategy - under the strong and value-centric leadership of Burke, Johnson & Johnson was able to effectively manage the Tylenol crisis.

### *Quick Action*

Professionals mentioned one of the CERC principles, response time, frequently in their responses. “Quick Action” refers to how swiftly Johnson & Johnson responded to the crisis and how this quick response positively affected the success of their crisis communication responses. In the CERC manual, Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) emphasize the importance of responding quickly during a crisis situation, especially if the crisis poses an immediate threat to the public. In the initial stages of the Tylenol case, nobody knew the origin of the cyanide contamination - the FDA was still testing Tylenol manufacturing facilities, and it would not be until nearly a week later when investigators determined that the cyanide came from a different source and not from the facilities (Gutowski, 2022). In the meantime, Johnson & Johnson decided to take quick action to warn the public about taking Tylenol pills and to promote their nationwide recall of all Tylenol capsule products (Gutowski, 2022).

Professionals agreed that the response time principle of CERC was executed extraordinarily well by Johnson & Johnson, as exemplified in the following quote from Professional 3:

Johnson & Johnson's response time was incredibly fast - the company came out and told the media before they even realized what had happened - but they immediately said, 'We're gonna pull everything and look at our processes and procedures' before they even knew that the contamination came from elsewhere and was not a mistake on their part (personal interview, Professional 3).

Professional 4 even argued that their quick response time played a significant role in why Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication response for this case is now studied worldwide as a successful crisis management case.

Tylenol is considered a textbook response for a reason. [Johnson & Johnson] took prompt responsible action – they went above and beyond to seek the root cause – even though investigation showed tampering only in the Chicago-land area. They responded nationally while probably knowing early on that it was confined. The result was extreme evaluation and change across the entire industry as it relates to increasing safety and security measures throughout the manufacturing, packaging and production chain (personal interview, Professional 4).

Additionally, Professional 1 detailed how the speed of the individual actions implemented by Johnson & Johnson also demonstrated the overall swiftness with which the company handled the crisis.

I think they gave steps for action in telling people how to return bottles of Tylenol and spreading the message, "please don't use the extra-strength pills", through word-of-mouth. They took fast action by pulling them off the shelves and encouraging people to bring bottles to stores with coupons and store credit - they responded as quickly as they could to this (personal interview, Professional 1).

Throughout their interviews, commenting on Johnson & Johnson's quick response time was a commonality among professionals, as exemplified by the "Quick Action" theme.

### *Trust*

The theme of "Trust" refers to the credibility principle of CERC and the success of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses in building trusting relations between the company and its consumers throughout the crisis. Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) explain the importance of establishing credibility during a crisis - obtaining the trust of consumers means that consumers are more likely to actively listen to and engage with the communication efforts of the organization, overall increasing the effectiveness of the organization's crisis management.

According to Professional 4, one way of doing this is through directly interacting with affected publics, which is what Johnson & Johnson did through their advertisements, press conferences, Tylenol hotline, and television appearances.

Things to do in a crisis: do not rely on the news media to tell your story. The organization should communicate directly with key stakeholders (i.e., employees, local elected officials, neighbors, customers, etc.)...Frame your messages with the public interest in mind (personal interview, Professional 4).

Throughout the interviews, several professionals praised Johnson & Johnson's adherence to the credibility principle within their responses. Professional 3 expressed their impressed feelings about the company's ability to build and maintain consumer trust during a serious and unprecedented crisis situation:

The company showed good examples of building credibility- since they didn't know where the contamination was coming from initially, if they had a series of these deaths without any action, it would've killed them. So I'm sure that within those exec offices,

they determined that they couldn't take this risk with people's lives (personal interview, Professional 3).

Furthermore, Professional 1 discussed how the company's trust-building tactics were partly due to the actions of employees, specifically James Burke, during the crisis situation.

Johnson & Johnson developed credibility by backtracking on their "no cyanide" statement - there was an incident where a rep told the media that there was no cyanide found in their manufacturing facilities, but later the company found out that there was actually cyanide in one of the facilities - it wasn't on the manufacturing floor, but it was still in the facility. Even though this cyanide didn't affect Tylenol, Johnson & Johnson still felt the need to tell the media and clear everything up. They also built credibility through Burke's personability and availability - he went on TV and talked, and he was very believable (personal interview, Professional 1).

The "Trust" theme exhibits professionals' opinions on the success of Johnson & Johnson's credibility-building tactics, giving insight into how well professionals believe that the company executed these tactics.

### **Themes Regarding The Talcum Powder Case**

#### *Dishonesty*

This theme refers to the views of professionals in regards to Johnson & Johnson's adherence to the accuracy and credibility principles of CERC within their talcum powder crisis communication responses. Throughout their interviews, professionals and students agreed that Johnson & Johnson engaged in dishonest communication within their responses to the talcum powder crisis, severely decreasing their credibility in the minds of consumers. Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) stress the importance of maintaining accuracy within crisis communication and

ensuring that the organization's response efforts are able to maintain, or even increase, credibility throughout the crisis's duration.

It should go without saying that releasing dishonest statements is not an appropriate way to interact with consumers during a crisis, something that professionals acknowledged in their interviews, as seen below in a statement by Professional 5.

“[Johnson & Johnson] is wrong. They fought it, they said ‘No, we’re perfect, we’re Johnson & Johnson!’ No, they are so wrong...they wanted to brush it away, and nobody wanted to look into it.” (personal interview, Professional 5).

The professionals who were most familiar with the talcum powder case expressed their disbelief and disappointment in their belief that Johnson & Johnson blatantly lied to consumers about their knowledge of previous asbestos contamination. Professional 1 noted how this hurt their consumer relations and reputation going forward:

[Johnson & Johnson] very boldly lied about their knowledge of the asbestos contamination - they said that they had no idea when, in fact, they did have that knowledge all along. If they had decided to do the right thing, they would have adjusted their formula to take talc out of their Baby Powder many, many years before. They may have tried to express empathy, but it was not believable to consumers because of all the exposed information about the company. This was a cover-up job from the get go and not the way to handle a crisis - by lying, they made it worse (personal interview, Professional 1).

Professional 2 commented on the terrible nature of Johnson & Johnson's decision to hide vital health and safety information about their product from their consumers.



[Johnson & Johnson] did hide for a while that there was asbestos contamination in their powder - they ramped up the advertisement for certain groups even though they knew the powder was contaminated. That's pretty reckless and horrible to be honest - they essentially knowingly poisoned people (personal interview, Professional 2).

This theme reveals that professionals believed that Johnson & Johnson displayed dishonesty within their responses, which, according to the CERC manual, is something organizations should absolutely never do.

### *Slow Response Time*

According to responses by professionals, another principle that seemed to be ignored by Johnson & Johnson was response time. In the CERC manual, Reynolds and Lutfy (2018) describe the need for quick communication during a crisis. The theme "Slow Response Time" refers to the lack of urgency in Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses, which was noted in the interviews of professionals and students.

Professionals concurred with the CERC manual's views on response time, and they expressed their belief that Johnson & Johnson did not correctly adhere to this principle. Professional 1 made the following general statement about their perspective on the timeliness of Johnson & Johnson's talcum powder responses:

[Johnson & Johnson] took a long time to respond - it was years before a proper response was made, which is obviously not what an organization should do, especially when facing a crisis that involved the health and wellbeing of consumers (personal interview, Professional 1).

Professional 3 made an interesting point in their response to Johnson & Johnson's response time - they explained the slow nature of cancer and how it could be decades before a material is

officially deemed carcinogenic, and they applied this concept to the response time of Johnson & Johnson's communication.

I think the main difference between [the Tylenol case and the talcum powder case] is, just, that cancer take a long time to pinpoint - it's going to take decades to figure out what causes cancer, so just the fact [Johnson & Johnson] probably were doing all this research, and they didn't want to go ahead and make any public safety decisions until they knew for sure - that was probably their first mistake. Why did they not change the formula or something in the meantime? (personal interview, Professional 3).

Professionals were largely concerned with the speed at which Johnson & Johnson responded to this crisis, exemplified by the "Slow Response Time" theme.

### *Shifts in Ideals*

This theme refers to commentary by professionals on the change in leadership and leadership values from the time of the Tylenol crisis in 1982 to the current talcum powder crisis. When interviewed, both professionals and students believed that there was an obvious shift in executive leadership between the Tylenol crisis and the talcum powder crisis. Several of the professionals already knew that Johnson & Johnson had undergone management changes, but none of the students knew about this since the researcher never revealed this fact at any point during the interview.

Professionals discussed the impact of new leadership on Johnson & Johnson's response to the talcum powder crisis. Professional 4 discussed these effects in regards to the talcum powder lawsuits, as seen below:

Many years later [after the Tylenol crisis], faced with the talc litigation, it appears [Johnson & Johnson] responded with different optics and in a defensive manner vs. a

‘let’s see’. Litigation through the years – and the optics of how juries and people seek to assign blame – has changed exponentially since the era of Tylenol (personal interview, Professional 4).

Additionally, Professional 1 expressed their steadfast belief that Johnson & Johnson’s CEOs after James Burke caused the company to undergo a value change, no longer turning towards their credo in times of concern and crisis.

I definitely think that CEO changes influenced Johnson & Johnson’s responses to [the talcum powder] crisis. They went from being stakeholders-centered to financial-centered, and I think this was the bottom line for Johnson & Johnson: what is this going to do for our product, and how can we keep this from damaging us? (personal interview, Professional 1).

Professional 5 also discussed the company’s management post-James Burke and how they believe that new leadership in the company resulted in the revenue-centric ideals of Johnson & Johnson today.

Once [James] Burke stepped down, things have not gone well ever since. It has been all about money after [James] Burke. Under [William] Weldon, who was Burke’s replacement, the company’s emphasis started shifting to profit margin, share price, and stakeholder shares - essentially, money. Weldon was definitely the beginning of their downfall (personal interview, Professional 5).

To conclude, professionals believed that Johnson & Johnson exhibited varying levels of success in their crisis communication responses to each crisis, as evidenced through the “Impactful Leadership”, “Quick Action”, and “Trust” themes for Tylenol and the “Dishonesty”, “Slow Response Time”, and “Shifts in Ideals” themes for talcum powder. Student interviews also

revealed thoughts aligning with these themes plus other themes from their think-aloud interview, as detailed below.

**To answer RQ3, interviews with IMC students were conducted to understand the success of Johnson & Johnson’s crisis communication responses in adherence to the six CERC principles from the perspective of young professionals who are about to enter the communications industry for the first time.** The researcher interviewed 10 IMC students: eight students were senior undergraduate students, and two students were second-year graduate students. All students interviewed had completed or were close to completing the IMC program curriculum, which includes courses that discuss public relations, social media, and crisis communications.

### **Themes Regarding the Tylenol Case**

#### *Well-Rounded Responses (Think-Aloud)*

The theme “Well-Rounded Responses” refers to the general excellence of Johnson & Johnson’s Tylenol responses without the specification of any CERC principle. In their “think aloud” portion of the interviews, most of the students focused on the overall success of Johnson & Johnson’s responses, not necessarily on how the company excelled in adhering to each individual principle. For example, Student 1 made the following statement while reading the Tylenol synopsis:

Wow, it seems like they did everything right. Yeah, they responded pretty well here - I think they did a good job with everything (personal interview, Student 1).

It was clear from their “think aloud” responses that the students that believed Johnson & Johnson was extremely successful in their general crisis communication strategy for the Tylenol crisis, as exemplified below by Student 2:

It's good that [Johnson & Johnson] responded very quickly. It's good that they immediately did a public service announcement. It seems like they did a great job with everything. Yeah, they definitely handled everything well (personal interview, Student 2).

Student 8 also commented on the general success of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses and tactics.

This is a really sad situation, but it's good that it created all these preventative measures.

They did pretty much everything [IMC students] have been taught to do. I think they did a pretty good job with all their responses (personal interview, Student 8).

Some students said more thoughts aloud than other students, but, overall, the "Well-Rounded Responses" theme exhibits that these types of remarks were a commonality throughout the students' "think aloud" responses while examining the Tylenol crisis synopsis.

### *Quick Action*

After the students were introduced to the six CERC principles, they focused on the response time principle in particular when they considered Johnson & Johnsons crisis communication responses to the Tylenol crisis, as exemplified by Student 4 below:

[Johnson & Johnson] implemented all the [CERC] principles really well, but I think they especially did well with responding first. They took immediate action in making sure that people knew the situation and not to take any Tylenol until everything was solved (personal interview, Student 4).

Student 9 brought up an interesting point when they commented on how remarkable Johnson & Johnson's response time was given that this crisis occurred in the 1980s, a time without the Internet.

I think that Johnson & Johnson did very good with their response time for the Tylenol crisis, especially with it being in the '80s and not having the tools we have now, like the Internet and social media - for really only being able to use television and radio, I think that they did a very good job (personal interview, Student 9).

In their response to how well Johnson & Johnson adhered to the CERC principles within their crisis communication responses, Student 3 remarked on the professionalism exhibited by the company in their quick response time.

It seems like [Johnson & Johnson] handled the crisis very professionally early on, which I think makes a better outcome. They also took accountability early on, too - they were very fast with their recalls and advertisements and everything (personal interview, Student 3).

Essentially, the “Quick Action” theme exhibits how students agree that because of the quick actions undertaken by Johnson & Johnson during the Tylenol crisis, the company was able to execute a textbook-worthy crisis communication response.

### *Trust*

Students also felt like Johnson & Johnson excelled particularly in building trust and credibility within their crisis communication responses. Student 8 viewed this idea through the company's consumer-focused responses, as exemplified by their statement below:

With their responses, [Johnson & Johnson] established things to protect their consumer first and not their company, which shows them to be a consumer-focused company. I think this probably made the consumers feel way better about taking Tylenol after the fact (personal interview, Student 8).

Student 6 also commented on how Johnson & Johnson built credibility through putting their consumers first within their responses.

Not only did [Johnson & Johnson] help victims' families, but they also weren't selfish. They removed all Tylenol capsules products to ensure that this situation wouldn't happen again, and they helped these families when they really didn't have to since this crisis wasn't a result of their own doing. That definitely would've made me trust them (personal interview, Student 6).

In their response, Student 2 expressed their general thoughts about Johnson & Johnson's credibility tactics and how successful they believe these tactics were.

I can see how [Johnson & Johnson] definitely built credibility with everything they did. It seems like they truly cared about gaining the trust of their consumers, which is how they should've felt given how tragic this crisis was. I think they did really well with this principle (personal interview, Student 2).

As one of the CERC principles, building trust and credibility is essential to the success of a company's crisis communication strategy, and the "Trust" theme demonstrates that students believe that Johnson & Johnson excelled in adhering to this principle within their communication responses and tactics in the Tylenol crisis.

### **Themes Regarding The Talcum Powder Case**

#### *Dishonesty*

Students felt the same way as professionals did, expressing their disbelief about Johnson & Johnson's language in their statements versus information revealed in the *Reuters* article that contradicted what the company said. It should be noted that only one student was familiar with

the talcum powder crisis prior to the interview, so most of the students' opinions and views on this case were influenced by the researcher's AI-generated synopsis.

Nearly every student interview was convinced that Johnson & Johnson lied in their communication responses, as seen below in a statement made by Student 5:

[Johnson & Johnson] seemed to lie to the public about what they knew, which is obviously not good. I don't even understand how anyone would allow this to happen. It's funny how the [Tylenol case and talcum powder case] have very different comparisons in their values here (personal interview, Student 5).

In their answer to questions about the success of Johnson & Johnson's talcum powder responses, Student 7 made the following comment on their views of the integrity exhibited in the company's responses:

[Johnson & Johnson] knowing that their products are contaminated yet still wanting to sell it to consumers is blatant false advertising and lying. Not to mention the health concerns that came from it (personal interview, Student 7).

Student 1 seemed to agree with this, as seen in their statement below:

In the Baby Powder situation, [Johnson & Johnson] just didn't seem to care. It's crazy that they knew about the contamination and actively decided not to warn people about this. I just can't believe a company would do this (personal interview, Student 1).

Overall, the "Dishonesty" theme highlights the views of students of the dishonesty displayed in several of Johnson & Johnson's statements in response to the talcum powder crisis.

#### *Slow Response Time*

In their interviews, students noted that they also thought that Johnson & Johnson exhibited exceptional slowness in their response time, as exemplified below by Student 1:



So, the first lawsuit occurred in 2009, and then nothing was publicly stated until 2016?

See, that's crazy to me. [IMC students] are taught to respond quickly and be the first one to do so, so it's crazy that this actual company just didn't do that (personal interview, Student 1).

Out of all the CERC principles, the students believed that response time was a principle with which Johnson & Johnson was especially unsuccessful.

I don't think they implemented any of the principles well, but they were especially really slow. They clearly did not do a good job of being first. (personal interview, Student 2).

In their interview, Student 6 found the company's slow response as even being immoral, as detailed in the following statement:

[Johnson & Johnson] should've communicated the contamination way earlier. Ethically and morally, they should've revealed this information. They should've done a recall way before, but they waited until government agencies stepped in (personal interview, Student 6).

Overall, the "Slow Response Time" theme exhibits interviewees' belief that Johnson & Johnson unsuccessfully implemented a quick response time when handling the talcum powder crisis.

### *Shifts in Ideals*

Since the professionals had prior knowledge of these changes, from the researcher's standpoint, it makes sense that they would discuss this during their interviews; however, it is interesting that the students also mentioned this, given that they said that they were not familiar with the history of Johnson & Johnson's leadership. After reading both synopses, multiple students asked the researcher if Johnson & Johnson had a different CEO during both of the

crises, and the researcher confirmed that they did. The following response from Student 3 reveals how students interpreted this when considering Johnson & Johnson's responses to both the Tylenol crisis and the talcum powder crisis:

Yeah, there's a definite shift between the responses. You would think [Johnson & Johnson] would've learned from the first time with the Tylenol crisis - they did such a great job there. In the Baby Powder crisis, they took action only when it was starting to hurt the business (personal interview, Student 3).

Student 4 also exhibited this belief, as demonstrated by their statement below:

There's definitely a shift there. With the Baby Powder case, [Johnson & Johnson] turned into a bunch of liars. They seemed defensive in this case, which is not how they acted with the Tylenol crisis - you can tell that they definitely changed leadership between the two (personal interview, Student 4).

Additionally, Student 7 also mentioned the company's sudden shift in leadership in their response below:

In the Baby Powder crisis, [Johnson & Johnson] did not want to lose a temporary profit by owning up to their mistakes. They went bankrupt many times, and it's definitely having to do with sales and leadership (personal interview, Student 7).

Essentially, the "Shifts in Ideals" theme reveals student thoughts on how changes in Johnson & Johnson's leadership negatively impacted their responses in the talcum powder crisis.

#### *Condemnation (Think-Aloud)*

In the think-aloud portion of their interviews, students were in disbelief by the talcum powder crisis background and Johnson & Johnson's responses. The "Condemnation" theme

refers to the verbal bashing of the company that was a commonality throughout all students' think-aloud interview when reading the talcum powder synopsis.

Student 8 made the following comment against Johnson & Johnson in their think-aloud interview:

Oh, I get why this was a big deal. Yeah, [it] seems like [Johnson & Johnson] didn't learn anything from the first time around. These are interesting ways to get information out to the public (personal interview, Student 8).

In their interview, Student 5 made a similar comment expressing their feelings about the talcum powder crisis, as seen below:

Oh my gosh, how was this allowed to happen? [Johnson & Johnson] is so wrong for that. Why would a company do this? Especially with a product for babies? They are awful (personal interview, Student 5).

Yet another condemning comment about the talcum powder crisis and Johnson & Johnson's responses was made by Student 1, as exemplified below:

Oh my gosh, they took three years to stop selling the powder worldwide? This is the same company [as the Tylenol case]? They knew it was contaminated? Yeah, that's wrong. They're wrong for that (personal interview, Student 1).

The emergence of the "Condemnation" theme from the students' think-aloud interviews revealed the real-time thoughts of students as they read and learned about the talcum powder crisis and how Johnson & Johnson chose to respond to the crisis.

### **Comparison**

Largely, both students and professionals expressed the same opinions about Johnson & Johnson's responses to both crises, which is why the researcher was able to identify themes

relevant to both professionals and students’ responses. It is worth noting, however, that there is an innate difference in experience between professionals and students: the communications professionals interviewed have had decades of field experience, specifically experience in crisis communication, and were able to apply their experiences and knowledge when looking at Johnson & Johnson’s responses. Therefore, this group’s responses were more holistic and approached each crisis from the perspective of multiple CERC principles.

To contrast, the IMC students interviewed have had four-six years of communication education, and one-two years of internship and/or job experience in the field. The students were able to answer the researcher’s questions well because of what they have learned in school, but they have not had the same real-world experience that the professionals have. Therefore, their responses tended to focus on the overall success of Johnson & Johnson’s responses, and most of the students did not display a strong focus on what the company did to adhere to each CERC principle.

Below are quote tables comparing quotes from professionals and students from the following themes: “Quick Action” from the Tylenol case and “Dishonesty” from the talcum powder case.

Theme: Quick Action	
Professional 3	Johnson & Johnson’s response time was incredibly fast - the company came out and told the media before they even realized what had happened - but they immediately said, ‘We’re gonna pull everything and look at our processes and procedures’ before they even knew that the contamination came from elsewhere and was not a mistake on their part.

Professional 4	<p>Tylenol is considered a textbook response for a reason. [Johnson &amp; Johnson] took prompt responsible action – they went above and beyond to seek the root cause – even though investigation showed tampering only in the Chicago-land area. They responded nationally while probably knowing early on that it was confined. The result was extreme evaluation and change across the entire industry as it relates to increasing safety and security measures throughout the manufacturing, packaging and production chain.</p>
Student 4	<p>[Johnson &amp; Johnson] implemented all the principles really well, but I think they especially did well with responding first. They took immediate action in making sure that people knew the situation and not to take any Tylenol until everything was solved.</p>
Student 9	<p>I think that Johnson &amp; Johnson did very good with their response time for the Tylenol crisis, especially with it being in the ‘80s and not having the tools we have now, like the Internet and social media - for really only being able to use television and radio, I think that they did a very good job.</p>

**Figure 10: “Quick Action” Quote Table**

Theme: Dishonesty	
Professional 1	<p>[Johnson &amp; Johnson] very boldly lied about their knowledge of the asbestos contamination - they said that they had no idea when, in fact, they</p>

	<p>did have that knowledge all along. If they had decided to do the right thing, they would have adjusted their formula to take talc out of their Baby Powder many, many years before. They may have tried to express empathy, but it was not believable to consumers because of all the exposed information about the company. This was a cover-up job from the get go and not the way to handle a crisis - by lying, they made it worse.</p>
Professional 2	<p>[Johnson &amp; Johnson] did hide for a while that there was asbestos contamination in their powder - they ramped up the advertisement for certain groups even though they knew the powder was contaminated. That's pretty reckless and horrible to be honest - they essentially knowingly poisoned people.</p>
Student 1	<p>In the Baby Powder situation, [Johnson &amp; Johnson] just didn't seem to care. It's crazy that they knew about the contamination and actively decided not to warn people about this. I just can't believe a company would do this.</p>
Student 7	<p>[Johnson &amp; Johnson] knowing that their products are contaminated yet still wanting to sell it to consumers is blatant false advertising and lying. Not to mention the health concerns that came from it.</p>

**Figure 11: “Dishonesty” Quote Table**

When comparing the responses between the professionals and the students, it is clear that the professionals are more thorough in their responses and more frequently discuss individual

actions taken by Johnson & Johnson that exhibit CERC principles. On the other hand, students describe the overall condition of Johnson & Johnson's responses.

In addition, the students did not mention leadership at all with the Tylenol crisis, but this is something that the professionals discussed frequently. This could be because students' minds did not automatically think about leadership, but the professionals knew to discuss leadership since they have had professional careers for decades. Because of this, the researcher decided to identify a separate third theme for the Tylenol crisis, only relevant to the professionals.

## DISCUSSION

### Thematic Analysis

Analyzing Johnson & Johnson's responses to the Tylenol and talcum powder crisis through interviews with communications professionals and IMC students revealed seven crucial themes: "Impactful Leadership", "Well-Rounded Responses", "Quick Action", "Trust", "Dishonesty", "Slow Response Time", and "Shifts in Ideals". These themes highlight the differences in success in adherence to the CERC principles between the company's responses to the Tylenol crisis and the talcum powder crisis.

#### *Understanding "Impactful Leadership"*

This theme is crucial to understanding one of the foundational elements of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses for this crisis, which was the company's credo. Throughout the professional interviews, this theme manifests itself in multiple examples, offering insight into the concepts of the theme from a professional perspective.

When a company responds to a crisis, the company's leadership can pave the way for successful crisis management. In general, the leadership of any company, organization, institution, etc. can influence how the company conducts business (Cote, 2023). One of the facets of successful leadership is promoting a strong organizational culture that is rooted in the company's mission, purpose, and vision (Cote, 2023). Having strong, morally-positive leadership can result in the best possible crisis communication strategy for the crisis, resulting in positive



consumer relations and brand reputation. During the Tylenol crisis, CEO James Burke exhibited this type of leadership, and his actions were a vital reason as to why the company had such a successful crisis communication response. His following of the credo not only salvaged consumer relations but also saved the company as a whole. To the professionals interviewed, Burke's excellent leadership was extremely apparent throughout the crisis and helped Johnson & Johnson maintain its image as a trustworthy, consumer-centric company.

#### *Understanding "Well-Rounded Responses"*

Sometimes, a company strictly adheres to a few CERC principles but either ignores or does not adhere as strongly to other CERC principles. In order to have an all-encompassing crisis communication strategy, an organization needs to implement all six CERC principles into their responses and tactics (Reynolds and Lutfy, 2018). When examining Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses throughout the Tylenol crisis, students felt as if the company exhibited this all-encompassing strategy. They believed that Johnson & Johnson displayed overall success in adhering to all CERC principles - in their opinions, there wasn't anything the company did wrong or even with mediocrity.

#### *Understanding "Quick Action"*

Responding quickly is a key component of the CERC framework - because this framework is for healthcare organizations, which often handle public health and safety crises, CERC highly recommends that organizations respond as fast as possible, especially if the crisis involves a public warning or emergency. The Tylenol case exhibited an emergency - it involved deaths due to product contamination, and it was absolutely necessary for Johnson & Johnson to spread this news to the public as soon as possible. Professionals and students agreed that Johnson & Johnson successfully did that - they responded quickly, issuing a nationwide recall of all

Tylenol capsule products and warning the public not to take any Tylenol products within a day of the company discovering that people had died from cyanide contamination.

### *Understanding “Trust”*

Another important CERC principle, building credibility is an essential component of executing a successful crisis communication strategy. Without consumer trust, it is possible for a company to experience a loss in revenue and profits, leading to potential bankruptcy or complete closure. In building credibility, the company is essentially saving their business and reputation among consumers. Both professionals and students believe that Johnson & Johnson went above and beyond in adhering to this principle - the company did everything that they possibly could to maintain consumer trust. This is largely due to Burke’s adherence to their credo, which lists Johnson & Johnson’s first responsibility as the consumers.

### *Understanding “Dishonesty”*

An organization should never be dishonest with its stakeholders - this goes against every principle of CERC. With the release of information in the *Reuters* article, it became evident that Johnson & Johnson hid from the public their knowledge of asbestos contamination in their talcum powder in the 1970s. In their statement to this article, the company did not exactly remedy public backlash - in fact, they received more backlash after detailing in their statement that their powder never contained asbestos, when there was physical evidence that it did at one point in time. Professionals and students discussed this in their interviews, emphasizing how wrong this is for an organization, especially a healthcare organization, to do. Both groups of people determined that Johnson & Johnson failed their consumers and, therefore, failed in adhering to virtually all principles of CERC.

### *Understanding “Slow Response Time”*

As stated under the description of the “Quick Action” theme, an organization should respond to a crisis as quickly as possible. Both professionals and students felt as though Johnson & Johnson failed in adhering to this CERC principle. The company knew their powder contained asbestos in the 1970s, but they waited until they received multiple lawsuits in the early 2010s before they publicly responded for the first time. Professionals and students believed that Johnson & Johnson should have responded exponentially more quickly than they actually did.

### *Understanding “Shifts in Ideals”*

As detailed under the description of the “Impactful Leadership” theme, an organization’s leadership and their values can dictate the company’s direction in their crisis communication responses. Both professionals and students thought there was a clear distinction between the leadership during the Tylenol crisis and the leadership during the talcum powder crisis - the company seemed to go from caring greatly about its consumers to caring less about the consumers and more about their financial state, which had a negative impact on how they handled the talcum powder crisis.

### *Understanding “Condemnation”*

Students’ first reaction when reading about the talcum powder crisis was to criticize Johnson & Johnson’s strategies and responses during the crisis. They expressed disbelief that a company would actively withhold safety information about their product from consumers and then proceed to lie when confronted with the truth. In the IMC curriculum, students are taught to be honest and transparent and respect the consumer first during a crisis, and they could not understand why Johnson & Johnson seemingly decided to ignore these foundational crisis communication elements.

Perspectives from both groups of people, professionals and students, are important to have for this study because, even though the responses differ in thoroughness, they demonstrate how Johnson & Johnson's responses for the Tylenol crisis are so obviously successful and how their responses for the talcum powder crisis are so obviously not. These groups of people, contrasting in experience and knowledge levels, both reached the same conclusions for the Tylenol crisis, which resulted in the following themes: "Impactful Leadership", "Quick Action", "Trust", and "Well-Rounded Responses". These are inherently positive themes, and they demonstrate that Johnson & Johnson successfully adhered to the six CERC principles within their responses to this crisis. On the other hand, the responses of both professionals and students to the talcum powder crisis resulted in these themes: "Dishonesty", "Slow Response Time", "Shift in Ideals", and "Condemnation". These themes are inherently negative, and they demonstrate that Johnson & Johnson did not successfully adhere to the six CERC principles within their responses to this crisis. In addition, the emergence of these themes for each crisis aligns with the case study conclusions developed by the researcher after examining literature on the two crises, confirming that scholars, researchers, and reporters largely agree with the findings from the interviews.

### **Practical Implications: Why It Matters and Future Applications**

The fact that all interviewees' responses for the Tylenol crisis resulted in positive themes and that their responses for the talcum powder crisis resulted in negative themes discloses important implications for the success of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication techniques in each crisis. Based upon the nature of the Tylenol and talcum powder themes, it can be reasoned that Johnson & Johnson implemented successful responses for the Tylenol crisis that strictly adhered to the six CERC principles but that the company did not implement the same

successful principles in their responses for the talcum powder crisis. According to several of the professionals, this could be because of the CEO changes Johnson & Johnson has experienced since the 1980s - in a broader sense, this idea demonstrates that the ways in which executive management decides to lead a company greatly influences all operations of the company, including communications. Although this study did not center on company management and ideals, the insights derived from this study can be used as examples of the impacts of effective, consumer-driven executive leadership and financial-centric leadership on a company's communication strategies.

Additionally, these two case studies can be examined by other organizations looking for direction within their crisis communication strategy in order to understand the best (and worst) real-world practices for crisis communication, stemming from the six CERC principles. The success of Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol responses confirms the effectiveness of the CERC principles - by being first, being accurate, building credibility, expressing empathy, promoting actions, and showing respect for affected publics, Johnson & Johnson's successful utilization of each CERC principle shows how these principles can be applied in a real-world situation and how they can drastically improve an organization's crisis communication strategy. In the talcum powder case, where Johnson & Johnson did not strongly adhere to the CERC principles, it is clear that their crisis communication responses suffered, and, as a result, the company lost trust among their consumers.

Furthermore, the two case studies underscore the value of an organization creating a crisis communication plan in order to be fully prepared for when (not if) a crisis occurs - organizations should expect the best, but they should also prepare for the worst. By developing a plan and identifying key stakeholders and organization employees, an organization will already

understand the proper steps to take during a crisis situation, and they can better adhere to the six CERC principles if they take the time to implement these principles in the plan beforehand.

Although it is becoming increasingly common for organizations to have a crisis communication plan, organizations who do have a plan are still in the minority. As demonstrated by the Tylenol and talcum powder cases, all organizations, in the health field or not, need to have a solid crisis communication plan that is ready to be used should a crisis occur.

Lastly, the implications of the professional versus student responses are that both a well-rounded communications education and field experience result in a better understanding of key communications principles, like the foundational elements of crisis communication. As a young communications professional gains more exposure to real-world successful communication strategies, they will also gain more knowledge in best practices of communications. Additionally, the world of communications is ever-evolving, from the introduction of social media to the recent creation of AI writing tools, and it is necessary for professionals to have a good comprehension of emerging technological tools. Therefore, for a communications student to become an outstanding communications professional, it is vital for communications students to study historical cases and examine their successes and downfalls but to also combine these lessons with current knowledge and information.

Ultimately, through qualitatively analyzing Johnson & Johnson's adherence to the CERC principles in their crisis communication responses to the Tylenol crisis and the talcum powder crisis, there is a more clear understanding of the necessary elements to include in successful crisis communication responses. Similarly, there is a more clear understanding of actions that organizations should not take if they are aiming to implement successful crisis communication responses. Additionally, the insights gained from this analysis can serve as teaching points for

crisis communication courses and curricula. Although there are multiple Tylenol case studies available, there are virtually no talcum powder case studies circulating the academia world yet, and even fewer case studies in general that related crisis communication responses to the six CERC principles. The two case studies in this paper offer new perspectives on these two crisis situations. Lastly, this study also highlights the worth of communications professionals in the workplace - with the proper education and knowledge, these professionals have a wide range of skills and expertise and are able to recognize the best ways to execute effective crisis communication responses, in addition to successfully performing their day-to-day tasks.

The examination of the crisis communication responses of Johnson & Johnson for the Tylenol and talcum powder crises and their following of the six CERC principles summarize the effectiveness of the CERC framework and the usefulness of adhering to its principles. The seven themes identified and the practical implications of the research provide a deep understanding of the components of successful and unsuccessful crisis communication responses. This analysis greatly contributes to the current academic literature, and it imparts valuable insights for organizations and individual professionals looking for guidance on crisis communication.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The timeframe and phases of the Tylenol crisis were easy to identify and understand because that crisis was a result of one-time incidents that occurred on particular dates and times. To contrast, the talcum powder crisis is an ongoing matter and does not have a set start and end date. This crisis is a result of company decisions and lawsuits made over the course of decades, so it is a bit more difficult to pinpoint the different phases of this crisis. Additionally, because the crisis is ongoing, there is limited literature on the communication responses and tactics implemented by Johnson & Johnson during the crisis. During the next few decades, as the crisis continues to unfold and, hopefully, come to an end, there should be more scholarly articles and book excerpts analyzing the crisis and Johnson & Johnson's responses. This is exactly what happened with the Tylenol crisis: much of the literature surrounding this crisis was published in the early 2000s, nearly twenty years after the crisis ended. In the talcum powder case study within this thesis, analysis information about crisis responses primarily came from newspaper articles because of the ongoing nature of the crisis; however, in time, there will be scholarly articles about the talcum powder crisis, and it would be beneficial for future research to incorporate those into their studies.

Additionally, communications professionals are extremely busy - they often have a heavy workload, and, because of this, they are difficult to get in contact with. Therefore, the number of professionals who were able to be interviewed for this study was limited. Going forward, future studies could include more than five professionals in order to get more professional perspectives



on the matter. They could also include another group of interviewees in addition to professionals and students, or perhaps divide the professionals into different groups: crisis communication professionals, social media professionals, public relations professionals, healthcare communication professionals, etc. This same idea could apply to IMC students - at the University of Mississippi, the IMC program offers specializations. Students could be grouped by their specialization - social media, public relations, healthcare, etc. Grouping the professionals and students could reveal a deeper understanding of how professionals and students from varying backgrounds view the success of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses.

A potential limitation of this study is that students were not introduced to the CERC principles until after they read each crisis synopsis. Because of this, students were not aware of what the CERC principles were while reading the synopses; thus, while they were reading during the think aloud section, they could not discuss their thoughts about Johnson & Johnson's responses in regards to these principles. However, if the students had been shown the principles prior to reading about each crisis, they would have already understood the essential elements included in a solid crisis response and might have produced biased thoughts during the think aloud sections. Without showing the students the CERC principles first, the researcher was able to obtain the true, unbiased thoughts and feelings of students and their first impressions of both crises and Johnson & Johnson's responses to each one.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the AI-generated synopses - in the future, there will be more AI tools, and its impacts on communications will be more obvious. Perhaps in future research, AI tools could be used more strongly and strategically in qualitative research. There are, of course, ethical implications with that, but this could be an interesting idea to explore. Additionally, Bradshaw et al. (2024) notes the value of AI as a helpful tool in building strategic

crisis communications, emphasizing the role of AI tools in developing effective messages to a wide variety of crisis situations.

Another idea worth noting is the impact of social media in modern times on crisis communication. In 1982, there was no social media, so Johnson & Johnson executives working with the Tylenol case had to communicate with the public using traditional media. Now, during the talcum powder case, Johnson & Johnson is active on all major social media platforms and has made several public statements on their accounts. It might be interesting to explore the intricacies and complexities of social media when it comes to modern-day crisis communication strategies versus strategies in the years prior to the invention of the Internet.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has analyzed Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses to the 1982 Tylenol crisis and the ongoing talcum powder crisis through the lens of the CERC principles and the perspectives of communications professionals and IMC students through case study analyses and in-depth interviews with professionals and students. The findings reveal distinct contrasts in how Johnson & Johnson adhered to the CERC principles in each crisis situation.

For the Tylenol crisis, both professionals and students agreed that Johnson & Johnson executed an exemplary crisis communication strategy that closely followed the principles of the CERC framework. The key themes that emerged praised the impactful leadership of CEO James Burke in upholding the company's credo of putting consumers first, the well-rounded and comprehensive responses covering all principles, the company's quick response time, and their credibility-building efforts to maintain consumer trust. Today, Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol response has become a quintessential case study on effective crisis management precisely because of how well they applied CERC principles.

In contrast, the response to the talcum powder crisis was viewed as a failure by both professionals and students in adhering to the CERC principles. Condemning themes arose around Johnson & Johnson's dishonesty in concealing knowledge of asbestos contamination, unacceptably slow response time in addressing public concerns over decades, and an obvious

shift in leadership priorities away from the consumer-centric ideals championed by Burke. Both professionals and students agreed that Johnson & Johnson violated core CERC principles of providing accurate information, maintaining credibility through transparent communication, and promoting an organizational culture of empathy and respect for public welfare.

The differences in Johnson & Johnson's approach to these two crises provides critical real-world lessons. The Tylenol response exemplified how closely following CERC can salvage consumer trust and protect a company's reputation even amid a life-threatening event. On the other hand, the talcum powder case study exemplifies how neglecting CERC principles and choosing deception over transparency can irrevocably damage public perception.

Looking ahead, this research emphasizes the value of CERC as an ethical framework for guiding organizations through crises, especially those involved with public health and safety. While the CERC manual cannot dictate ethical and successful decision-making within companies, it can provide clear guidelines for how to uphold the public's wellbeing as the top priority. The success of the Tylenol response validated CERC, while the poor management of the talcum powder situation highlights the consequences when the CERC principles are ignored.

In conclusion, the responses of Johnson & Johnson to the Tylenol crisis and talcum powder crisis in relation to the six CERC principles demonstrate the core elements of successful crisis communication management. By analyzing the company's responses through the perspective of the CERC principles, the thesis contributes to the understanding of effective crisis communication responses and tactics for any organization, providing a basis for future research endeavors as the tools for crisis communication management continue to evolve.

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## APPENDIX

*1-*

Informative Fact Sheet About Study - Caroline Tibbs

### **INFORMATION SHEET**

**Title: : Interview About Johnson & Johnson's 1982 Tylenol Crisis and the Ongoing Talcum Powder Crisis and The Company's Crisis Communication Responses and Tactics**

#### *Investigator*

Caroline Tibbs

*Department of* Integrated Marketing Communications

*The University of Mississippi*

(662) 915-7146

#### *Advisor*

Debbie Hall

*Department of* Integrated Marketing Communications

*The University of Mississippi*

(662) 915-7146.

### **Description:**

The purpose of this study is to gather insights on both students' and professionals' perceptions on Johnson & Johnson's adherence to the six principles of CERC within their crisis communication responses/tactics in their Tylenol and talcum powder crises. We would like to ask you a few questions about J&J's responses and tactics. Your name will be asked, but it will not be used to identify you in the researcher's project. All participants will be given aliases (student 1, professional 1) in the researcher's project.

### **Cost and Payments:**

It will take you approximately 20 minutes to complete the interview.

### **Risks and Benefits:**

The only possible risk from participating in this interview is not initially knowing how to answer a question or not initially understanding the question, in which cases the researcher will repeat the question and/or give the interviewee ample time to develop an answer to the question.

Benefits include considering information from a new perspective and learning about information that you may have previously not known.

### **Confidentiality:**

In the instance you are recorded, recordings will be used for clarification purposes and will be stored on password-protected secure storage. Recordings will be kept until May 2, 2024 and will be destroyed on that day.

### **Right to Withdraw:**

You do not have to take part in this study, and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you must do is to tell Caroline and/or

Professor Hall in person, by letter, or by telephone (contact information listed above). You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer.]

### ***Student Participants in Investigators' Classes***

*Special human research subject protections apply where there is any possibility of undue influence – such as for students in classes of investigators. Investigators can recruit from their classes but only by providing information on availability of studies. They can encourage you to participate, but they cannot exert any pressure for you to do so. Therefore, if you experience any undue influence from your instructor, you should contact the IRB via phone (662-915-7482) or email (irb@olemiss.edu) and report the specific details. You will remain anonymous in an investigation.*

### **IRB Approval:**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

### **Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understand the above information. By continuing with the study, I consent to participate in the study, and I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

2-

Interview Guide: Professionals

**Public Relations Practitioners:**

- a) Welcome and thank the interviewee for their time.
- b) Introduce myself.
- c) Explain the purpose of the interview. Read research questions and explain the purpose of this project.
- d) Produce the informed consent document.
- e) Ask the following questions:

### **Case Study Background**

1. What is your age?
2. How familiar are you with health product brand Johnson & Johnson?
3. How familiar are you with the Tylenol cyanide contamination crisis that occurred in 1982?
4. How familiar are you with the ongoing talcum powder contamination crisis?
5. What, if anything, do you know about crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC) and its six principles?

### **CERC Principles**

1. How can an organization's reaction time in responding to a crisis situation potentially affect consumer relations with the organization?
2. How does being accurate play a role in crisis communication responses?
3. How can organizations build credibility prior to a crisis situation occurring?
4. What is the value of an organization utilizing empathetic language/displaying physical signs of empathy within their communication to people affected by a crisis?
5. How can an organization implement "promotion of actions" (i.e. giving affected people a meaningful task to complete during a crisis) within their crisis communication strategy?
6. What are some ways that an organization can show respect to people affected by a crisis?

### **Tylenol Case Study**

1. How would you describe Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses and tactics during the Tylenol crisis?
2. How successful do you believe Johnson & Johnson's crisis management strategies were?
3. How did former CEO James Burke contribute to the crisis communication responses and tactics?
4. In terms of the principles of CERC, what did Johnson & Johnson do right and wrong?

### **Talcum Powder Case Study**



1. How would you describe Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses and tactics during the talcum powder crisis?
2. How successful do you believe Johnson & Johnson's crisis management strategies were?
3. Do you believe CEO changes influenced Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication responses and tactics for this crisis?
4. In terms of the principles of CERC, what did Johnson & Johnson do right and wrong?

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Interview Guide: Students

### **Integrated Marketing Communication Students:**

- a) Welcome and thank the interviewee for their time.
- b) Introduce myself.
- c) Explain the purpose of the interview. Read research questions and explain the purpose of this project.
- d) Produce the informed consent document
- e) Ask the following questions:

### **Background**

1. Can you tell me your age and then tell me what you know about Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol incident in 1982?
2. Can you tell me what you know about Johnson & Johnson's Baby Powder incident?

### **Tylenol Crisis & Talcum Powder Crisis Synopses**

- a) Produce a synopsis about the Tylenol crisis and Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication strategies summarized using AI technology.
- b) Ask the interviewee to read the synopsis.
- c) Ask the following question while the interviewee is reading synopsis:
  1. What thoughts are coming to your mind as you read this?
- d) Produce a synopsis about the talcum powder crisis and Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication strategies summarized using AI technology.
- e) Ask the interviewee to read the synopsis
- f) Ask the following question while the interviewee is reading synopsis:
  1. What thoughts are coming to your mind as you read this?
- g) After the interviewee is done reading both synopses, ask the following question:
  1. Can you compare and contrast the crisis communication responses and tactics used by Johnson & Johnsons in these two scenarios?

## **CERC Principles**

- a) Produce a graphic that lists all six CERC principles and that describes each one.
- b) Ask interviewees the following questions:
  1. After reading about these principles, how well do you think Johnson & Johnson adhered to them in their responses and tactics to the Tylenol incident?
  2. How well do you think Johnson & Johnson adhered to them in their responses and tactics to the baby power incident?
  3. Do you have any other thoughts on either of these crises or how Johnson & Johnson managed them?

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Tylenol Crisis Synopsis:

### **Background on the Johnson & Johnson Tylenol Crisis:**

- Tylenol, a leading over-the-counter product in the U.S., faced a crisis in 1982 when cyanide-laced capsules caused multiple deaths
- Johnson & Johnson, the parent company of Tylenol, had to urgently address the situation to protect public safety and preserve trust in the brand
- The crisis unfolded in the Chicago area, where poisoned Tylenol capsules were discovered on store shelves.
- This unforeseen tampering incident challenged Johnson & Johnson to navigate a complex crisis communication scenario.

### **Summary of Johnson & Johnson Tylenol Crisis Communication Responses:**

- Johnson & Johnson took immediate action to protect public safety:
  - Issued a nationwide warning not to consume Tylenol.
  - Withdrew all Tylenol capsule products from shelves.
- Utilized media to communicate safety alerts and establish hotlines for inquiries.
- Introduced triple safety seal packaging to prevent tampering.
- Handled press conferences, including national broadcasts, to address the crisis.
- Offered victims' families counseling and financial support.
- Increased transparency and open communication with the public and media.
- Implemented new inspection processes and safety measures to prevent future crises.
- Earned public trust by accepting losses and portraying the company as a victim of external circumstances.

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## Talcum Powder Synopsis:

### Background on the Johnson & Johnson Talcum Powder Crisis:

- Johnson & Johnson currently faces heavy scrutiny for talcum powder's link to ovarian cancer.
- 2009: First lawsuit; 2018: news organization *Reuters* reveals J&J's knowledge of asbestos contamination of their talcum powder product in the early 1970s in an incriminating news story.
- Forced to pay over \$700 million in lawsuits as of January 2024, with 1,200 pending litigation cases from women with ovarian and mesothelioma cancers.

### Summary of Johnson & Johnson Talcum Powder Crisis Communication Responses

- Filed three different times for bankruptcy (in 2021, 2023, and 2024) in lieu of paying settlements owed to plaintiffs - still have not paid the \$700 million, but in early January 2024, they came to a payment agreement with 43 state attorney generals
- Stopped selling talc-based powder in America in 2020
- Stopped selling talc-based powder worldwide in 2023; started selling cornstarch-based powder only
- Knew that powder was contaminated, but never said anything publicly until it was publicly revealed
- Denied contamination accusations, even though powder was scientifically proven to be slightly contaminated
- Released statements in 2016 and 2018 claiming misinformation about talcum powder had been spread and ignored the actual issue, which is the contamination of the talc powder, not the actual talc powder itself
- Created a website to educate the public on the facts about talcum powder in 2018
- Released statements after every litigation case starting in August 2019
- Developed an advertisement in 2018 to speak their truth about the situation after the *Reuters* article was released
- Did one recall in 2019 when a lot of their powder tested by the FDA was found to be contaminated with asbestos, but that was the only recall that they ever did

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## CERC Principles Summary:

### Summary of CERC Principles

- **Be First (Response Time)**
  - Communicate information quickly
  - Public's preferred source is usually the first to provide information
- **Be Right (Accuracy)**
  - Ensure information conveyed is correct

- Release only known facts, address incomplete information
- **Be Credible (Credibility)**
  - Establish trust through honesty in communication
  - Transparency in processes and promises made
- **Express Empathy**
  - Demonstrate understanding and consideration of others' feelings
  - Use inclusive language to connect with affected publics
- **Promote Actions**
  - Offer meaningful tasks to calm anxiety and restore control
  - Tasks can distract from crisis and reduce negative emotions
- **Show Respect**
  - Treat affected individuals as unique, deserving of dignity
  - Respect promotes cooperation and rapport between organization and public