



Crisis Response Plan

Megan Tonti, XX, XX, and XX

Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California

Executive Summary

The Center for Intersectional Media and Entertainment (CIME), pronounced "see-me," is an organization dedicated to advancing intersectional representation in film, television, and new media. The organization is crisis-prone (Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2003), with primary risks including personnel, IT security, and reputation concerns. However, the most salient risk to the livelihood of the organization is tied to the organization's structure. CIME depends on its founders for leadership and day-to-day operations but has no strategy for their unexpected absence or departure. The organization has already faced multiple situations where one or more founders were not available for an extended period of time or where the founders' primary responsibilities (as CIME is not their primary job) had to take precedence. Most recently, when one of the founders was busy moving, the CIME team realized they needed critical business documents to open a new bank account. The documents were packed somewhere in the belongings of the founder moving and were unable to be immediately located. These few examples demonstrate the critical risk CIME faces due to its organization's structure. With no central point or succession plan, they face unnecessary hurdles with lost paperwork, halting operations that impact other staff members and clients, and ultimately create the organization's potential to cease to exist. Until changes are put in place, it can be expected that the CIME leadership team will continue to find themselves in similar situations.

Organizational Context

CIME's leadership team is composed of three founders, Dr. Nicole Haggard, Joy Donnell, and Munika Lay, whose thought-leadership and reputations within the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) space in Hollywood position them as champions for increasing representation not just in films, but also in the entertainment workforce. These three founders are well-known

within their respective fields - academia, film, and production. Together they co-founded CIME and have used their positions to create additional awareness and change for a matter in which they care deeply. All three founders work other demanding, full-time jobs which pull their attention and time in multiple directions. While each founder has a direct role in specific projects they lead for the organization, Dr. Haggard is most involved with CIME's day-to-day operations, including recruiting and training other team members and keeping projects moving forward.

As a small organization with limited resources, CIME's culture can be described as tight-knit, mission-driven, and resilient, having survived several "near misses" in the past. For example, at one point in time, Dr. Haggard was hospitalized and unable to work on CIME initiatives for an extended period of time. As other founders were busy with jobs and lives of their own, organization operations nearly came to a halt. There have been multiple conversations regarding what would happen if one of the founders were to get another job - would CIME even continue? A departure of a founder may cause the end of CIME due to commitment. While it is plausible that another individual could start within the organization and learn from these three women, there is currently the thought that CIME is recognized within the industry because of the individual founders and their networks. Without the founders' credibility, the organization would not have the same connections, access, or listenership that it currently does.

Method

Data collection throughout the process of working with CIME was primarily executed through two main processes, interviews and internet research, which guided the recommendations and analysis completed. Three virtual-video interviews have been completed with the client, plus follow-up on emails for clarification and additional data collection. Internet research provided the team with insight into the scope, engagement, and perception of CIME within the industry, helping identify potential risks. The initial virtual video meeting with CIME

founder Dr. Haggard introduced the research team and project scope. The first comprehensive virtual video interview was completed on Friday, January 29, 2021, and was conducted using a set of questions (Appendix A) developed of Mitroff's Wheel of Crises (Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2003), adapted to specific potential scenarios facing CIME that the team derived from the first meeting. The most recent interview for this portion of the project's scope was completed with Dr. Haggard on Sunday, March 27, 2021, also via virtual video conference. This interview was recorded, and each member of the research team created a set of personal notes that would become the basis for a review of CIME's communication channels, as well as other aspects of the organization and updates since the last interview. Dr. Haggard was the primary CIME contact and interviewee throughout the project's scope due to her function as day-to-day lead within the organization and the busy schedules of the other founders, which have also been noted as risks to the organization.

Analysis and Recommendations

The founders of CIME, Dr. Nicole Haggard, Joy Donnell, and Munika Lay, are fundamental in three aspects to CIME's essential function in a manner that is such that the departure of either of them would be life-threatening for the organization: thought leadership, representation, and administration. While they have developed a strong culture within their organization and an even stronger reputation within the industry, weaknesses within the organization structure present opportunities for business aspects such as decision-making processes. CIME's leadership style is currently malleable and influenced by business needs, although the day-to-day leadership responsibility is not currently equally represented across all three founders. The organization has embraced casual communications with key stakeholders to

foster organic relationships. The following sections will dive deeper into these aspects with corresponding recommendations for the organization as it faces the crisis outlined above.

Priorities and Decision Making Processes

To successfully navigate the type of crisis identified in this report, several items must be considered. Timely decision-making, the effective deployment of resources, and strategic flexibility will be priorities for CIME in the event of a founder leaving. After speaking with Dr. Haggard, it is clear that CIME embodies the "descriptive decision" theoretical framework in that their past responses to problems have been adaptive, fast-acting, and not necessarily in line with prior planning efforts (Hughes, 2020). Triage should be leveraged as a mitigation strategy, with the sequence being first the rapid assessment of the situation, followed by outlining priorities, and third allocating limited resources - all in a timely fashion (Moore & Bone, 2017). For example, in an interview with Dr. Haggard, she reflected on the past year. One could say CIME experienced a "near miss" in that Dr. Haggard had to take an unexpected medical leave for several months in 2020, which is the temporary version of the larger predicted crisis outlined. Compounded by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Haggard lacked the means to communicate the current change in status quo to CIME's stakeholders. As a result of her absence, action items slipped through the cracks, pending business deals were made null and void, and many clients were left not knowing why they had not heard from CIME. Specifically, upon her return to work, Dr. Haggard had to return money to a contact who was on retainer and navigate an overflowing inbox of unreturned business correspondence. Dr. Haggard became concerned that CIME had lost credibility and suffered a reputation hit as a result of going radio silent for months. Looking back on this near miss, the number one priority for CIME will be timely

communication through multiple channels to announce any significant change that will impede their ability to perform, such as the temporary or permanent loss of a founder.

Due to the organization's size, CIME's administration and decision-making are highly dependent on its founders and are stretched thin due to the other non-CIME activities of the founders. As a result, the three founders have split some of the administrative tasks and responsibilities to address the staffing limitations. The drawback is that in the absence of one of the three founders, a relatively large section of the administration responsibilities needs to be covered by the two remaining founders. Additionally, because of the partnership's legal structure, there is a dependence on specific members' signatures and access to original documents that they each keep. This aspect came to light with the closure of the organization's bank and the complexity of the access to the partnership documents needed to open a new bank account, which requires the availability and engagement of all three founders. The indisposition of one of the members, in this case, could have been devastating, bringing a complete financial halt to the organization. To resolve this issue and prevent it from continuing again in the future, CIME must invest in the organization by creating a permanent administrative or business management role within their structure.

Leadership

Based on conversations with Dr. Haggard regarding CIME operations, the organization embraces an adhocracy culture, with very few formal processes when it comes to policies and procedures within the organization. For example, other risks identified are tied to the lack of background checks conducted on incoming employees/interns, no data security, and no protection in the event clients stop paying retainers. The "entrepreneurial spirit" (Bowers et al., 2017, p. 555) that comes with this culture does, however, help CIME thrive in terms of

championing change and allows them to pivot quickly as research projects or opportunities arise. Using the CRLM provided by Bowers et al. (2017), the hypothetical crisis this case focuses on would be considered an internal crisis. Aligning that with their adhocracy culture, a transformational leadership style would be best suited to lead CIME through a crisis of this sort. This aligns with the recommendations put forth in the previously developed CIME Crisis Prevention Plan, as the need for a more comprehensive succession plan and proactive preparations for an unexpected absence were identified. These solutions would also best align with a transformational leader as attention to the details is critical while still seeing the bigger picture (Bowers et al., 2017).

CIME's leadership team sits in a unique position due to their thought-leadership within the industry, as well. The three founders came together to create CIME. They had a fundamental belief that they could make a difference in intersectional representation in media and entertainment if they joined their intellectual capabilities, dedication to the cause, and credibility in the industry. As a result, CIME is unmatched in thought leadership in intersectional representation in media and entertainment, even though it is a crowded field, due to the approach from their unique perspectives mixing academia, experience, fieldwork, and business acumen. Others in this field do not represent all three aspects. Most are based on academia and limited ability to help with applications in the field. The second most common area of expertise is counseling, often without the business and industry perspective; thus, the solutions or guidance provided are one-sided and less likely to be accepted by the media and entertainment industry. The third aspect is the reputation and engagement that CIME has within the industry, thanks to the consulting work being done. Through intersectional representation in media and entertainment, CIME is therefore unique. However, this would not be possible without the

different sets of expertise and experience of their founders. It is, therefore, clear that the departure of one of the three founders would potentially be life-threatening to the organization as it would lose a competitive edge in a crowded field. The difficulty of replacing a departing member from a thought leadership perspective would be challenging as a replacement would need to have similar expertise and experience. While sourcing such a person would be very difficult in itself, the history and the present members' symbiosis would be almost impossible to recreate with a replacement. A lesser risky approach would be to add partners sooner rather than later to reinforce the present expertise and experience and potentially even grow it. With a conscious duplication of expertise, CIME's competitive advantage could be enhanced in the medium term, and the risk of loss in case of a partner's departure reduced.

The three founders of CIME are not only thought leaders in intersectional representation in media and entertainment, but they also represent diversity themselves by who they are. Identifying each with a different racial identification and each representing diverse approaches to the media and entertainment industry through their background in creative, business, and academia areas, the three founders are not only talking; they are intersectionality themselves. This representation by who they are creates a solid level of credibility and branding by itself when it layers on top of the thought leadership covered above.

Stakeholder Communication

CIME has identified several stakeholders, but if a founder were to leave either temporarily or permanently, these stakeholders would include the organization's employees, clients, and network. CIME's network includes those who are underrepresented in the industry and people who would potentially work with or recommend them to their companies.

If the crisis stated above occurs, CIME should implement actional legitimacy. This concept includes four steps: acknowledging the issue, taking steps to fix it, taking clear action, and committing itself to issue resolution (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Applying this concept in the situation a founder left for any reason, it is recommended that CIME first discusses with its internal stakeholders to discuss the organization's next steps. However, this should be done promptly. After internal stakeholders and remaining founder(s) discuss, CIME should announce the situation to its external stakeholders with a solution to keep the organization stays afloat. Directing its message toward rebuilding the organization should focus on being attentive to CIME's stakeholder needs (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). As explained by Sellnow and Seeger (2013), the next step is to take clear action. This could be done by introducing the company's new leadership concept at their roundtable talks, on its social media pages, or by sending an email or newsletter directly to its external stakeholders. Lastly, it is recommended that CIME's leadership stay an organization that its external stakeholders can rely on by allowing those who are underrepresented in the industry and others who are wanting to become allies with them, commit to being a constant for them.

Conclusion

The absence of one of CIME's co-founders has been detrimental to the organization because near-miss situations like this have happened in the past, which has caused the organization to halt operations. If this full-scale crisis comes to life, CIME must have a succession plan and more robust organizational structure in order to survive. The succession plan could consist of a few different scenarios, such as bringing in a backup co-founder or training current employees to help fill this role. Having current employees trained could help CIME because the organization will not have to make adjustments to their current finances, and they

will already have someone trained and ready to be a leader if a co-founder unexpectedly leaves permanently or in a temporary departure. Additionally, creating a permanent full-time administrative or business management role will help CIME steer a clear course when these issues arise. CIME should also create a document that details what is expected of the fill-in co-founder for an easier transition for proactive measures. Addressing the notable areas and recommendations provided above will ensure CIME has a more solid foundation when an organization crisis strikes.

References

- Bowers, M., Hall, J., & Srinivasan, M. (2017). *Organizational culture and leadership style: The missing combination for selecting the right leader for effective crisis management*. *Business Horizons*, 60(4), 551–563.
- Center for intersectional media and entertainment. (2020). CIME. <https://www.cime.us/>
- Hughes, M. (2020). A diagnostic tool to determine a strategic improvisation Readiness Index Score (IRIS) to survive, adapt, and thrive in a crisis. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 88, 485–499.
- Mitroff, I. I., & Alpaslan, M. C. (2003). Preparing for evil. *Harvard Business Review*, 81(4), 109-115.
- <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=9489166&authtype=ss&custid=s8983984>
- Moore, B., & Bone, E. A. (2017). Decision-making in crisis: Applying a healthcare triage methodology to business continuity management. *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning*, 11(1), 21–26.
- Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2013). *Theorizing Crisis Communication*. Wiley-Blackwell. Chapter 7, "Theories of Influence and Crisis Communication" (pp. 163–187)

Appendix A

Initial Engagement Questionnaire

Crisis Vulnerability and Prevention Plan

Investigation engagement with CIME, January 29, 2021

As part of this project, we will build off the Crisis Vulnerability and Prevention Plan and ultimately develop a Crisis Response Plan for CIME. With this assignment, we will develop an informed analysis, evaluation of CIME's crisis preparedness, and create a set of recommendations for the organization moving forward. Throughout the next few weeks, we will need to gather data regarding how CIME has currently prepared for foreseeable a crisis, what planning has been done for potential unforeseeable crises, and what past crises have influenced the development of current crisis plans. By the end of February, we should have a Crisis Vulnerability and Prevention Plan to share for your review.

Here are examples of some risks/vulnerabilities we might find/identify in the CIME organization:

- The possibility of an accident or some other failure that could harm stakeholders.
- The potential impact of a natural disaster, emergency event, or social movement may impact the organization's operations, suppliers, or product/service sales.
- An ethical scandal that may harm the organization's reputation and/or public trust.
- An internal scandal that could directly impact the organization financially.

During our investigation, we might also be able to identify the differences between perceived problems that CIME understands and actual risks of crisis. This should help CIME in its tactical planning as problems are operational issues while crises are unforeseen threats to the organization that could jeopardize the goals of the organization.

As a second phase of the project, we will build off the Crisis Vulnerability and Prevention Plan and ultimately develop a Crisis Response Plan for CIME. This project will build off one of the potential crises we identify in our Crisis Vulnerability and Prevention Plan. The plan developed will be a guide to respond to the crisis and communicate with stakeholders. This plan will be completed by early April and might require some additional data collection needed in the interim.

Questions for this week's discussion :

Based on the definition that a crisis is an unforeseen or unpreventable event with a potential impact that is a threat to the goal(s) of the organization.

- Has CIME experienced any crisis so far?
- Do you consider that COVID 19 has created a crisis for CIME (i.e., working remotely, which opens CIME up to potential cybersecurity threats; health of employees)?
- Do you have a crisis plan in place at the moment? If so, what has your crisis planning process been like so far?
- Do you feel that you have had some crisis “near misses” (harrowing close calls that could have been a lot worse)?
 - What experiences has the organization gone through that have opened your eyes to potential crises?
- How do crises/major events within the film industry typically impact your organization?
- Can you think of an internal company crisis that could directly impact your day-to-day operations?
- What is the worst-case scenario event/crisis you can imagine happening to your organization?

- During our first discussion, you mentioned that one crisis that you were expecting potentially was related to the future student interns. Can you describe what your perceived risks are?
- Which of the following categories of crises does CIME see as a possibility?
 - **Reputation crises** (rumor-mongering or slander, logo tampering)
 - **Information crises** (theft of proprietary information, tampering with company records, cyberattacks)
 - **Criminal crises** (product tampering, kidnapping or hostage situations, acts of terrorism)
 - **Personnel crises** (strikes, exodus of key employees, workplace violence, or vandalism)
 - **Physical crises** (industrial accidents, supply breakdowns, product failures)
 - **Economic crises** (recessions, stock market crashes, hostile takeovers)
- Have you identified anything as industry “warning signs” of a crisis or problem coming?
- Could we have a detailed description of:
 - The CIME organizational structure
 - The CIME goals and objectives (if not on the Web site)
 - The CIME plans for the next 3 years as far as expansion (people/locations/industries, Etc.)
 - Any existing crisis plan (response, prevention, manual, or any document along those lines).
 - Details of who CIME considers key stakeholders
- Do you have anything else you feel is important to tell us?

Appendix B

Secondary CIME Interview Questions - March 27, 2021

- Can you please reconfirm who you understand to be your primary stakeholders?
- Does the method in which you communicate with stakeholders change if you're dealing with a crisis or issue?
- How does CIME typically communicate with clients/partners?
- How do you recruit for roundtable events? Has this process proven to be successful/effective?
- How does CIME leverage social channels?
 - Based on response - do different platforms serve different purposes?
- Who is responsible for internal communications within CIME? Are there both formal and informal communications that take place? Are there preferred mediums/channels?
- How are the contents of the CIME website developed and content updated? Who has editorial content? What happens if an error is noticed?
- Does CIME monitor press and social media for content related to CIME's image and/or reputation? If yes, which ones, how, by whom?
- Are you happy with the amount of press/media coverage CIME enjoys at the moment and the way it is being portrayed?
- Does CIME have a policy as far as who can talk to the media? Does CIME develop content for its employees when communicating to the media about CIME, events, clients, positions, or engagements?
- Does CIME develop speaking points for its employees when communicating informally about CIME?

- What medium is used to communicate internally within CIME?
- How would you characterize internal communications within CIME? If we asked the previous question to all employees and volunteers, would we get similar responses?
- Does CIME have competitors for the consulting functions? If yes, who?
- Do you have resources that you wish you had? What would they help you achieve?