CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

The evidence behind emotion-led crisis management

What peer-reviewed research says about emotion, empathy and outcomes in crisis communication. From My PR Partner, July 2026.

80%

Jacinda Ardern's approval rating during the early pandemic, against a G7 leader average of 48%, in the most-studied case of empathetic crisis leadership.

3 months

How long negative stock market effects persisted after CEOs displayed inappropriate emotion in public apologies (ten Brinke & Adams, 2015).

r = .23

The small effect the traditional strategy-matching playbook has on reputation, by its own field's meta-analysis (Ma & Zhan, 2016).

The question

Crisis communication has a well-established rulebook. Frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) train practitioners to assess responsibility, select a matching response strategy and protect the organisation's reputation. What that rulebook has historically said far less about is emotion: what the people affected by a crisis are feeling, and what the organisation itself expresses when it responds. A fair question for any communications leader is whether an emotional dimension actually produces better outcomes, or whether it is simply a softer style of delivery.

Over the past decade, a body of peer-reviewed research, most of it controlled experiments published in leading public relations and management journals, has answered that question directly. The short version: **emotion is not a soft add-on to crisis management.** It is a measurable driver of reputation, forgiveness, purchase intention and, in at least one landmark study, share price.

What controlled experiments show

The foundational study is van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014) in *Public Relations Review*. Using a vignette experiment simulating an organisational crisis, the researchers found that beyond the choice of response strategy, the emotions the organisation communicated (shame and regret) had a positive effect on corporate reputation. Emotional signals reduced public anger and increased acceptance of the organisation's message.

Empathy has since emerged as the central mechanism. Across three experiments, Schoofs, Claeys, De Waele and Cauberghe (2019) showed that stakeholders' empathy towards an organisation provides a second explanation for reputational outcomes, alongside the responsibility judgements that earlier research had treated as the whole story. The traditional model, in other words, was incomplete: how much the public blames an organisation matters, and so does whether they feel with it.

Later experiments measured the effect of specific communicated emotions on hard organisational outcomes. Schoofs and Claeys (2021), in the *Journal of Business Research*, found that a chief executive verbally expressing sadness increased public empathy towards the CEO, which in turn improved the organisation's reputation, and that in the post-crisis stage both verbal and facial expressions of sadness improved reputation. Ndone, Warner and Duffy (2022) ran a 922-participant experiment and found that expressed guilt outperformed expressed anger regardless of the response strategy chosen, and that rebuilding strategies outperformed denial. Ndone and Park (2022) demonstrated with 648 participants that both cognitive and affective empathy mediate the relationship between crisis type, reputation and forgiveness, and that publics feel more empathy towards organisations that use rebuilding strategies than towards those that deny. Most recently, Ndone (2025) showed across 686 participants that publics' empathy amplifies or diminishes the effectiveness of crisis response strategies on reputation, forgiveness and purchase intention.

Two further studies round out the picture. Kim and Cameron (2011), in *Communication Research*, demonstrated that the emotional framing of crisis news changes how publics process information and evaluate the company, and that the advantage of emotional appeals in corporate responses depends on how the crisis has been framed by the media. Xiao, Hudders, Claeys and Cauberghe (2018) extended the outcomes studied beyond reputation, examining how emotions expressed in crisis responses shape consumers' negative word-of-mouth intentions.

The financial evidence

The strongest commercial proof point comes from ten Brinke and Adams (2015) in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. Analysing real corporate apology videos alongside archival stock market data, they found that displays of inappropriate emotion (happiness) during public apologies were associated with negative stock market returns, with adverse financial effects persisting up to three months after the apology. Displays of sadness had a protective effect on returns, and the effects were stronger when the apology was delivered by a higher-status representative. Their follow-up experiment explained the mechanism: observers read a smile during an apology as insincerity, which reduced their confidence in the organisation. **Markets, in short, price emotional congruence.**

The limits of the traditional playbook

The case for an emotion-led approach is strengthened by what the traditional framework's own evidence base shows. Ma and Zhan (2016) conducted the meta-analysis of SCCT research in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and found that the effectiveness of crisis response strategies in protecting reputation is in fact rather limited: the strategy-matching construct at the heart of the model had only a small effect ($r = .23$), while attributions of responsibility carried far more weight. The dominant playbook, by its own meta-analysis, explains less than most practitioners assume.

Notably, even the architects of SCCT found early evidence pointing towards emotion. Coombs and Holladay (2008) reported that both apology and expressed sympathy produced higher post-crisis reputation than information alone, and concluded that in certain circumstances a statement of sympathy accompanied by information could substitute for a formal apology. Expressed compassion, in their own data, performed on par with the field's supposed gold-standard response.

Crisis leadership in practice: the New Zealand case

The most studied real-world demonstration of emotion-led crisis leadership is Jacinda Ardern's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. McGuire, Cunningham, Reynolds and Matthews-Smith (2020), in *Human Resource Development International*, analysed 40 of Ardern's speeches and public statements from March and April 2020 and concluded that an effective pandemic response required not only planning and coordination but the ability to communicate clear, consistent messages in an empathetic manner, in a period when New Zealand recorded a far lower transmission rate than most industrialised nations.

Voina and Stoica (2023), in *Media and Communication*, analysed Ardern's crisis communication as an ethics of care built on empathy and responsiveness, noting that her approval rating exceeded 80 per cent during the initial stages of the pandemic against a G7 leader average of 48 per cent. Simpson, Rego, Berti, Clegg and Cunha (2022), in *Leadership*, theorised her compassionate leadership, widely described as "kind and strong", as a means of building legitimacy and resources in an upward spiral, challenging the assumption that compassion and effectiveness trade off against each other.

Reading the evidence honestly

Three qualifications matter. First, most of the direct evidence comes from controlled scenario experiments. These are strong on causation but should be generalised to live crises with care; the stock market findings of ten Brinke and Adams (2015) and the New Zealand case studies help offset this by grounding the pattern in real-world outcomes.

Second, the effects are conditional rather than blanket. Which emotion is expressed, at which stage of the crisis, and how sincerely, all change the result: sadness built empathy but reduced perceived competence in the acute stage, guilt outperformed anger, and insincere smiles were punished by investors. Emotion-led crisis practice is therefore a discipline of matching emotional expression to the moment, not simply an instruction to be more emotional.

Third, this remains a young literature. What it firmly establishes is that emotion-centred, empathetic crisis communication drives reputational, behavioural and financial outcomes that purely rational frameworks are incomplete without it. That is the evidence base on which emotionally intelligent crisis leadership now stands.

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