The Reset:

Connecting Internal Crisis Communication Strategy with Post-Pandemic Remote Worker Populations Through an Employee Engagement Framework

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

School of Communication and the Arts

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Abstract

In the post-pandemic workforce, unprecedented events are the new normal. Although the remote worker revolution has been rumored for decades, in early 2020, the idea became an instant reality when global governments closed their borders, instituted lockdown, and ordered citizens to shelter-in-place (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Given the global shift in work, organizations have an immediate need to communicate with the crisis-laden, post-pandemic, remote workforce; however, there is a sizable gap in research between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population. Through a phenomenologically based, interpretive analysis of current strategic and crisis communication research and frameworks, this project provides a starting point for addressing these challenges. It defines and establishes the gap between internal crisis communication and the revolutionized remote worker population and then seeks to bridge the gap by proposing a modified framework for strategic communication rooted in employee engagement scholarship. It concludes with a R.E.S.E.T. strategy that paves the way for practical next steps, future research, and marketplace application.

Keywords: strategic communication, internal crisis communication, COVID-19, coronavirus, remote workers, workplace flexibility, employee engagement, zones of engagement, pandemic
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The Reset: Connecting Internal Crisis Communication Strategy with Post-Pandemic Remote Worker Populations Through an Employee Engagement Framework

Preface: Where This Journey Really Begins

They busted through the door, yelling her name, ready to tell the story of their day, and she held up one finger to shush them. *I’m in a meeting*, she mouthed silently. The three smiling faces nodded knowingly, this was normal. They gave her a thumbs up, she blew each a kiss, and they exited quietly to do their homework. Her eyes filled with tears as she tried to listen to her tenth meeting that day. *What are they even talking about*, she thought, as those in the office talked exclusively to those in the room. They had switched topics to the football game this weekend. *How was school?* she wondered. *How did you do on the spelling test?* Deep breath. *It’s almost 5 pm.* She could take a break to start dinner, clean up, and help with the remnants of homework. *The soccer socks were still in the washer,* she thought, *there’s no way they’ll dry in time. I don’t know how much longer I can take this,* she thought for the hundredth time that day.

It wasn’t that she didn’t love her job. She was exceptional in her work and a leader amongst her peers. She had won all the awards, led all the committees, captured all the titles, and earned a paycheck that honored her efforts. *Top 40 Under 40, Millennial on the Move, Best Woman in Business*… the title and trophies just kept coming. But she didn’t put those trophies on the shelf. Her home office shelf was full of funny faces, reindeer made from pipe cleaners, and the latest drawing from one of her kids haphazardly taped to any empty place she could find.

She sipped her cold coffee and glanced at the mug. Scrawled across it were the words, “the mountains are calling, and I must go.” *Yeah right,* she thought.

*Focus.* Now they were back on the agenda. She had worked in the corporate office as an executive for many years. Then, after her husband landed a job out of the area, she became the
first remote worker for the organization. Without tools, technology, or support of any kind, she made it work. She had kept her job and status; she kept her place at the top of the corporate ladder.

A little hand opened the door quietly, and tiny feet slowly crossed the floor, zigzagging to avoid the creaky places. The 7-year-old handed her a torn piece of paper with a simple message: Mom, can I be the first to talk to you when you’re done? The tears were back. *I don’t know how much longer I can take this.*

The Real Remote Worker

This was my story. It is the real story that inspired this dissertation. This project was born from the white flag I waved that day—that day, I hit a wall. As a remote worker, I was chained to the desk for the main office’s traditional workday. My technology issues were consistent. At that time, most of the tools I had been provided did not work. I was frustrated. Success was my normal, but this new working environment had challenged that paradigm.

I could not succeed professionally and keep my sanity under these conditions. As a remote worker, everything had changed. All the traditional signs of approval and value were still there. However, in this remote environment, I was often ignored or overlooked. So, after many years of rallying above my frustration and doing my best to achieve a different outcome, I shocked them all and gave them my notice. They countered with more money, more significant titles, and better projects. But it was not what I needed. I was already working remotely. I needed better equipment, greater flexibility, and more engagement from the team. This was too new, so they didn’t understand what I needed. Truthfully, they didn’t ask. They didn’t know me and could not grasp how I could trade flexibility for salary, title, or status. The organization’s tight grip on traditional parameters for work didn’t translate well remotely. I had to choose.
This is my story. But it does not have to be this way.

This dissertation tells a different story about the strategic and communicative paradigms for remote workers. It offers a better way.

Organizations are filled to the brim with competent, efficient, and self-sufficient employees who, until last year, were frustrated and unfulfilled. They squeezed themselves into the corporate box. And then the pandemic happened. What constrained nations gave unsuspecting employees new freedom. A new space for creativity. A new degree of flexibility. And fulfillment they never imagined possible.

While some employees might need flexibility for a specific reason, many need it because they are more productive in non-traditional environments. Even without the pandemic, a recent Upwork survey suggested that nearly 36% of the American workforce will be fully remote by 2025, which is more than double the number of remote workers employed pre-pandemic (Ozimek, 2020). We know the unprecedented workplace shift, fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, forced people to work remotely well beyond this percentage. Though many businesses suffered, others found ways to harness technology and revise corporate protocols to thrive in the new digital work environment.

As the post-pandemic workplace begins to take shape, it is essential to rethink the relationship between work and place. There is tension between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic workplace. Those who are required to return may not want to. Those given a choice may wonder what they will miss out on should they choose to stay remote. It is called FOMO—a colloquial term for the “fear of missing out,” and Cohen (2021) suggests that it will be the thing to drive workers back into the post-pandemic office. The meetings after the meeting, the inside jokes, and the whispered mention of an unknown project from the people in the room will be
enough to return the masses back to their commutes and cubicles. And back to frustration. Those who must stay remote by design or by choice will face a new normal in work relationships characterized by face-to-face through a digital interface and heightened expectations for quick responses and accessibility.

Although many remote workers are products of the pandemic, the freedom and benefits they experienced on the other side allowed them to press a professional reset button. Fulfilled in an entirely new way, many workers may never return. If they are not coming back, organizations must learn to communicate with this post-pandemic population, especially during crises, and crises come in many forms. It may be a hurricane, a merger, a faulty product, a divorce, or an exceptionally bad day. If organizations are to continue to thrive with a quarter or more of their population working from home, then we must learn how to best communicate with remote internal populations (i.e., remote employees) during a crisis.

This chapter presents a clear roadmap for addressing the remote worker. The intent is to provide an overview of this project, from the foundations in scholarly research to the practical recommendations that offer constructive opportunities for developing a more detailed consideration of the communication landscape and remote worker engagement in crisis situations moving forward. The end goal is to enlarge the conversation and equip leaders with a new framework for a new kind of employee in an evolving workplace.

The Primary Objective

This project aims to define the post-pandemic remote workforce and understand their needs so organizations can better communicate with this growing population throughout the crisis life cycle. While the pandemic is the workplace pivot and crisis backdrop for this conversation, it is not the central focus of this effort. The primary objective of this dissertation is
to theoretically connect crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker to
strengthen communication effectiveness during the crisis lifecycle.

The Problem

While there is a significant body of research in internal crisis communication, there is no
solid theoretical understanding or framework of how to communicate with post-pandemic remote
worker employee populations before, during, and after crisis.

The Research Questions

This dissertation proposes two questions:

RQ1: What are the gaps in the body of research between internal crisis communication
and remote worker populations?

RQ2: Could current strategic communication models or frameworks be updated,
modified or adapted to better illustrate the opportunity to reach the remote worker population
before, during, and after crisis?

Since this project's scope could easily extend in multiple directions, it is essential to limit
this discussion to an interpretive approach that examines communication and crisis scholarship to
identify gaps, opportunities, and strategic theoretical and practical next steps for advancing
engagement between organizations and remote workers. The intent is to establish a foundation
for studying specific organizational contexts and conducting empirical research moving forward.

An Interpretative Approach

After a preliminary review of the research, I discovered that the problem I experienced in
the workplace was both common and unstudied. While bloggers worldwide echoed these woes
and rightly noted the challenges, the scholarly research connections between remote workers and
their organizations were scattered between silos, both inside and outside strategic communication
research. In order to pursue future studies to evaluate effective internal crisis communication strategies with post-pandemic remote worker populations, a convergence is needed: there must be an understanding of what has been done to establish what must happen next. With this in mind, a thorough examination of the strategic communication landscape explores both the external and internal perspectives, which culminates in three main applicable silos: crisis communication, organizational communication, and remote worker communication. The silos each reveal ideas that, if connected, offer a way to bridge the gap between internal crisis communication and post-pandemic remote worker populations, the most well-defined idea being employee engagement.

To this end, this dissertation seeks to engage the dominant scholarly voices currently contributing to this discussion to deepen a theoretical and practical understanding of engagement between organizations and remote worker populations. To accomplish this task, a humanities-based phenomenological approach is employed. This approach allows for an interpretive analysis focused on bridging the gaps in theoretical and conceptual frameworks that currently inhibit a clear pathway for addressing remote worker populations in crisis. This project aims to explore these gaps and looks for stronger theoretical connections for delivering more comprehensive remote-worker employee engagement pathways. The intent is to establish theoretical inroads for future research endeavors by comparing theory with theory to analyze opportunities for more textured scholarship dedicated to advancing the strategic theoretical and practical communication conversation right now and for future research that impacts the marketplace.

Since this discussion rests in the theoretical, it is important to remind this audience that there is an actual population behind the post-pandemic remote worker discussion. We know these people, and often, we are these people. With this in mind, each chapter will begin with a
narrative re-telling of different remote worker experiences. These narratives remind us that remote workers are not a faceless population but rather a complex group of incredibly diverse individuals. While the interpretive discussion drives the analytical portion of this conversation, the narrative layers a realistic dose of humanity integral to this dissertation.

**All Signs Point to Engagement**

During a comprehensive review of literature from the pre-pandemic remote worker population, strategic communication (i.e., public relations and organizational communication), and crisis communication, it became clear that there is one shared thread: the employee is valuable. Valuing employees and engaging them promotes retention, job satisfaction and boosts company revenues (Staples et al., 2006). Remote workers flourish when engaged (Staples et al., 2006). Some scholars consider employee engagement to be a game-changer in crisis situations (Saji, 2014). In short, employee engagement is the key.

With this key in mind, this dissertation will present research from multiple scholarship silos to make connections that directly apply to the post-pandemic worker population in crisis. In Chapter 1, this interpretive analysis will illustrate the current post-pandemic marketplace and associated organizational challenges to present the problem at hand. The challenge of communicating to a new, remote worker population necessitates a second chapter devoted to three areas of scholarship: remote workers, crisis communication, and employee engagement. As we will discover, while employee engagement was not the initial focus of this dissertation, it quickly came into focus as both crises and remote worker success strategies named it as a core component (Coombs, 2015a; Staples et al., 2006). With these silos of research broken down and connections highlighted, Chapter 3 will transition to closing the gap between post-pandemic worker scholarship and crisis communication, using Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of
Engagement. With the Zones redefined for the post-pandemic remote worker population, Chapter 4 will complete the modification of the framework by aligning the crisis lifecycle with the Zones to create the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers. This framework will ultimately provide many opportunities for future research and practical application, outlined in Chapter 5.

While this analysis is theoretically based, it is also essential to acknowledge that real people exist behind these theoretical frameworks. With this in mind, stories of real post-pandemic remote workers will weave reality into this theoretical discussion. Their stories are different, but they tell the story of a population that has yet to be defined. This dissertation will build a bridge theoretically and, at the same time, characterize a population to provide practical solutions to a very real problem.

A Modified Framework & Practical Strategies for the Marketplace

The outcome of this interpretive analysis is the modification of Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement. This model, a staple in the academic and marketplace conversation about the ways employees experience engagement, offers a strategic opportunity for bridging the gap between internal crisis communication and the remote worker population. Engaged remote workers are more successful than disengaged remote workers (Staples et al., 2006), but more importantly, engaged employees are more successful in crisis (Coombs, 2015a). This interpretive dissertation will close the gap and provide a blueprint for success using employee engagement.

However, closing the gap is not enough. The content must be applied in a practical way to the workforce so leaders in the marketplace can utilize this theoretical content. Aligned with the stages of crisis, future research will test the new framework, but practitioners can also utilize strategies based on the research-driven content within the post-pandemic workplace. Claeys and
Opgenhaffen (2016) pointed to a divide between scholars and practitioners and suggested that scholars have a responsibility to deliver their research to the marketplace in a usable way. The workforce is transitioning, and the marketplace must communicate with this new population throughout the crisis lifecycle. This interpretive discussion is essential to today’s workforce, and there is an immediate need for guidance to lead organizations in the post-pandemic marketplace.
Chapter 1: From High Heels to Hikers

The post-pandemic corporate world is in the process of defining its new workforce and the relationship between work and place. Organizations have the opportunity to press a reset button on outdated ideas and structures that no longer apply to a workforce that is mixed with remote and traditional workers. Within this process, organizations are learning to communicate during crisis and after crisis. But they must also prepare for the next crisis. The crisis is coming. Whether or not an organization is equipped to communicate with its new workforce effectively is yet to be seen.

This dissertation anticipates the need for more strategic and engaged communication throughout the crisis lifecycle. It recognizes the limitation on theoretical and practical crisis frameworks and considers an expanded frame of reference for building more robust pathways between the organization and this new remote workforce. The employee becomes an essential strategic element for both ongoing engagement and successful navigation of crisis. Utilizing both story and scholarship, this chapter will set the scene within today’s marketplace to define the problem the workforce faces and present a solution to optimize remote worker crisis communication in the future.

Where Do We Begin?

There is an invitation in this historical moment to rethink the way work and place align. We have an unprecedented opportunity to revisit how we engage employees for more than just outcomes and productivity. They know it more than ever. Now it is on the organization to recognize the importance of fulfillment in work and life. We must tell a new story for effective strategic communication during crisis situations. And that story begins with the employees.
Meet Sarah. She works remotely for Spotify from an aging dining room table, next to a window overlooking the rugged, mountainous terrain of Truckee, California, a town not far from Lake Tahoe (Haag, 2021; Patella, n.d.). Originally based in-office at the Spotify Headquarters in New York City, Patella took a weekend trip to Truckee in March 2020 and could not return due to COVID-19 lockdowns, both in New York City and California (Haag, 2021).

One glance at her Instagram reveals so much about this past year. She traded her stilettos and city-savvy all-black ensembles for a more natural and comfortable wardrobe. No longer in high heels, Sarah sports hiking boots and casual outfits all day, every day. She is a woman who found herself in a new way while taking advantage of the opportunity to live in a less structured environment (Patella, n.d.). But there is more to her change. More mountains, more snow, and seemingly, more joy. Her position has not changed, but her outlook is remarkably altered. During an interview with *New York Times*, Patella summed it up this way, “I love being in the city, but you think about your life, the life experiences you want or the different chapters you might want, it’s totally different now. It’s totally life-changing” (Haag, 2021, para. 16).

**The Undetermined Future of Work**

Trading heels for hiking boots certainly has its appeal, but the benefits and impacts of this “permanent and tectonic shift in how and where people work” has significant implications on how organizations communicate and manage their employees (Haag, 2021, para. 5). The people, like Patella, are impacted. The organizations are impacted. The economy is impacted. With all this distance and noise, how are organizations supposed to communicate to this unknown population, especially amid crisis?

In early 2020, Spotify occupied over 16 floors of a looming skyscraper in Manhattan (Feinberg, 2021). A year later, in the 2nd quarter of 2021, most offices sit empty, echoing the
Partnership for NYC’s staggering statistic that approximately 90% of Manhattanites still worked remotely (Feinberg, 2021). In a city that depends on foot traffic, from hot dog vendors to coffee shops, the ripples from the pandemic crisis continue to shatter the traditional image of work.

Solidifying this shift, Spotify launched a Work from Anywhere program in early February 2021. According to the cloud-based music organization, the program offered “a new way of collaborating that allows Spotifiers to work from wherever they do their best thinking and creating… whether they’d prefer to work mostly at home or in the office—as well as their geographic location” (Kelly, 2021a, para. 2; Lundstrom & Westerdahl, 2021). The traditional workplace ideas no longer apply.

Yet another cloud-based software company, Salesforce, shared their vision for the future of work on their company blog. President and Chief People Officer Brent Hyder (2021) wrote, “We must continue to go forward with agility, creativity and a beginner’s mind—and that includes how we cultivate our culture. An immersive workspace is no longer limited to a desk in our Towers; the 9-to-5 workday is dead” (para. 6). This is the stunning statement that few have said, but many have thought: death to the traditional workplace.

While some companies step wholeheartedly into this new frontier, other organizations are considering an alternate route. Facebook and Apple both purchased new space, securing millions of square feet across Manhattan in late 2020 (Associated Press, 2020; Haag, 2021). Perhaps they use this space for the rumored hybrid model of work, combining attractive and shareable office space with remote work opportunities (Kelly, 2021b). According to Kelly (2021b), the hybrid model offers real estate cost savings and a new lease on life for employees but could come at a cost with many unknowns. Yet, even with this sensible solution, a red flag emerges. This post-pandemic remote population is different. According to Sijbrandij (2020), “Hybrid creates two
fundamentally different employee experiences to manage.” The in-office (i.e., traditional) and remote working crowds could form two separate workforces that will potentially need different types of management, communication, and recognition if they are going to be successful.

Many industries also whisper of a complete shift to a distributed work model. Rather than focusing on traditional versus remote, the distributed model accepts that all employees work differently and in different places and seek “to overcome the logistical challenges of supporting and enabling groups” (Clifton, 2020, para. 7). Clifton (2020) described a distributed environment where employees on the same team telecommuted, worked in-office, worked in-office and at home, worked a typical 8-hour day, and worked an irregular schedule throughout the day and night. The goal was not to find one method that worked for everyone but rather to construct a digital landscape that enabled all employees to collaborate.

Illustrated through the evolutions of Spotify and Salesforce, the post-pandemic shift leans into an employee-centric workforce. They asked employees to build their perfect world. If an employee could be more creative in Tahoe, it was approved. If an employee needed to work an alternative schedule to juggle elementary school children, it was approved.

The pandemic changed all preconceived notions about how the world should work. And because we know the future of work is still in process, the goal of this discussion is to help pave the way for a stronger, more strategic communication framework for engaging the remote workforce, regardless of where work and place align. To do so, we must know the issue at hand.

The Issue

This new population of post-pandemic remote workers was born from crisis, and they operate in this context of pandemic crisis every day. Although this crisis type is unique (i.e., pandemic), the crisis lifecycle exists all the time. Coombs (2015a) said that the crisis lifecycle,
which included the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages, was ongoing, continuous, and unending. As soon as a crisis is resolved, an organization immediately transitions into preparation for the next crisis. Although the stages of crisis have varying lengths, the cycle, according to Coombs (2015a), was always active. Since the crisis is a norm in organizational life (Coombs, 2015a; Seeger, 2006), leaders must learn to communicate effectively with the crisis lifecycle in mind. Crisis communication is an ongoing strategy that must be implemented regardless of the perceived season.

Organizations must find a way to effectively communicate with this evolving population as they navigate the crisis lifecycle (Coombs, 2015a). Rather than implementing outdated approaches that were initially designed for traditional workers, organizations have an opportunity to prioritize the uniqueness of the remote employee and create a platform for long-term employee and organizational success. However, the post-pandemic population is unstudied, and even pre-pandemic remote worker research is lean when it comes to crisis communication. Therefore, this dissertation will first illustrate the gap between post-pandemic remote worker populations and research in internal crisis communication. Then, this project will close the gap between post-pandemic remote worker populations and internal crisis communication with employee engagement, which is a common thread in multiple bodies of applicable research. In order to establish our footing in this season of this crisis, we first examine the pandemic that caused the workplace to pivot and the ongoing effects of the virus on the overall marketplace. While the pandemic is not the central focus of this discussion, it is the accelerant that pivoted the remote workforce into a new normal.
The Pandemic Pivot

In the early months of 2020, while nations kicked off their plans for year-long success, an unprecedented crisis descended upon the world. This crisis, known as coronavirus or COVID-19, systematically stretched across the globe, instilling fear, death, and suspicion into most of humanity. The pandemic had “a massive impact on the world’s economy,” halting the business of entire industries, like airlines and tourism (Gomez et al., 2020, p. 403).

According to Gomez et al. (2020), in the last twenty years, there have been a number of other global and economic crises, which ranged from economic downturns (i.e., 2000 and 2008) to social crises (i.e., poverty, hunger) to crisis in the environment (i.e., global warming). Although other pandemics threatened communities, COVID-19 was the first, in recent history, to cause “a situation of maximum emergency and alert by health authorities, with an important aspect on economics and society” (Gomez et al., 2020, p. 403). This was unprecedented. According to Smith-Bigham and Hariharan (2020), the best techniques to minimize the effects of the virus (i.e., isolation, shelter-in-place orders) were also some of the most detrimental to the economy. The pandemic halted much of life as we know it, forcing people and organizations alike into a pivot that they not only did not expect but also did not include in their plan for their future.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

While the virus did not initially cause global panic, by mid-2020, few were left unscathed. Agerfalk et al. (2020) argued that COVID-19 “changed our world forever. Thousands of people are dying, millions of people are in lockdown, and many businesses will not survive” (para. 2). This dire perspective, written in June 2020, reflects a perspective on the virus that continued to thrive well into the 2nd quarter of 2021 (Agerfalk et al., 2020).
First documented in Wuhan, China, 41 patients associated with the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market contracted an unknown pneumonia-type virus in December 2019 (Neilson et al., 2020). In January 2020, China identified the virus, had its first associated death, placed the city under lockdown, and the World Health Organization declared a global emergency as a host of other countries, including the United States, developed COVID-19 cases (Neilson et al., 2020).

In February 2020, death tolls increased, and cases spread across the globe, which encouraged countries like Italy and the UK to institute lockdowns (Neilson et al., 2020). By March 2020, the outbreak was labeled a pandemic, travel bans restricted entry and exit, and over 30% of the world was under some type of lockdown order (Neilson et al., 2020). According to Neilson et al. (2020), by April 2020, nearly 95% of Americans were on lockdown, and 42 states had issued stay-at-home orders.

By September 2020, global coronavirus deaths exceeded 1 million, even though “the 1 million figure number is known to be an undercount … given the lack of widespread testing in many nations, as well as suspected concealment of cases and deaths in some countries like Russia and Brazil” (Neilson et al., 2020, para. 43). As non-essential businesses were shut down (Saldana, 2020), organizations of all sizes began to furlough and dismiss employees. In able corporations, remote work was considered a viable option, even though few were prepared for this unprecedented shift.

**The Death of the Office**

By spring 2020, governments across the globe locked down cities and ordered mandatory stay-at-home restrictions for non-essential businesses. Organizations were unprepared and severely challenged to send their entire workforce home (Savic, 2020). In addition to technology
challenges, employees were mentally and emotionally unprepared (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020; Savic, 2020), due in many respects to the multitude of roles they now held during the workday (i.e., employee, teacher, cook, housecleaner) (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). While much of the workforce held these household roles pre-pandemic, most compartmentalized the responsibilities into sections of time: before, during, and after work.

Neilson et al. (2020) reported that nearly 95% of Americans were on lockdown in April 2020, which meant that most of those workers converted from traditional job roles to remote work. Although the remote worker growth curve had flattened in recent years, research suggested that over 25% of the workforce participated, pre-pandemic, in a flexible work arrangement (BLS, 2017; Mercer, 2020; McMenamin, 2007; World at Work, 2005). Previously considered a disruptive trend, COVID-19 fully launched remote work, despite the lack of prepared connectivity (i.e., internet), training, and remote employee personality fit (Deloitte, 2016).

This had a tremendous impact on employee perception of the workplace. Before the pandemic, 50% of opinions from the workforce on remote work were positive, 40% were neutral, and 7.5% were negative (Wrycza & Maslankowski, 2020). However, during the pandemic, in April of 2020, 62.2% of opinions on remote work were positive, 10% were neutral, and 27% were negative (Wrycza & Maslankowski, 2020). Part of the initial increase in negativity could likely be attributed to both the learning curve and the forced entry into remote work (Waizenegger et al., 2020). While traditional offices offered ergonomic furniture, the new remote environment had ill-prepared home office setups, which caused neck, back, and overall muscle pain (American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2020; Baker et al., 2018; Tietze & Nadin, 2011). Technology was not ready in most organizations to serve the mass employee
exodus. When the employees did exit, they were met at home by their spouses, children, parents, or other quarantined household members (Waizenegger et al., 2020).

Despite the challenges, most employees thrived in remote working environments, and productivity remained intact (Dahik et al., 2020). This new normal was working, and positive opinions of remote workers grew substantially after the onset of COVID-19. Most people surveyed finally chose a side, and for many employees, returning to the office was no longer a favorable option.

The practical realities of remote work were increasingly embraced. New meeting protocols and work-home tensions created spaces where people had to make the best of an often complex situation that involved remote working, parenting, and educating, all at once. As the initial lockdown ended in America, the hope of returning to the office quickly diminished. According to Nicoll (2020), over 70% of offices had an open floor plan, which in the COVID-19 era was one of the deadliest environments since the virus “feeds on density” (para. 6). Between majority worker preferences and COVID-19 sanitation requirements, the option for returning to company-wide traditional work grew less and less realistic.

**Compounding Crisis**

The pandemic traumatized the workforce, but the virus was not the only issue in the workplace. While the jump to remote work was significant, other factors distracted from an organization’s ability to quickly implement and sustain the wave of remote workers. Many organizations found themselves entrenched in a compounding crisis during the pandemic. Defined as a crisis event that happens right after another crisis event all within the same organization, a compounding crisis hits a company when it is already down. An organization is
metaphorically hit by a huge wave and finally able to stand and partially regain its footing when a second wave hits them again, often from out of nowhere.

This second crisis makes it nearly impossible for an organization to rebuild its reputation quickly (Veil & Anthony, 2017). Additionally, a phenomenon known as the pariah effect occurs when partner companies drop their support of an organization to separate themselves from the crisis (Veil & Anthony, 2017). Organizations are often so bullied in the pariah effect and underwater from the previous crisis that they have no choice but to take responsibility for the compounding crisis. Corporations were not responsible for the pandemic, but when they had to shutter their doors after months of quarantine, the burden was inescapable.

When applied to internal crisis strategy, if an employee was explicitly held responsible for a crisis, then Veil and Anthony (2017) suggested that coworkers might distance themselves from him. If co-workers’ distanced themselves from a critical employee, teams and systems could easily break down and threaten the organization’s strength. If a compounding crisis occurred, critical employees might resign to avoid damaging their own professional reputation. Veil and Anthony (2017) offered the example of FEMA, which was overcome by the Hurricane Katrina crisis. The media depicted FEMA as slow to act and an organizational disaster. On the heels of this event, FEMA’s formaldehyde crisis occurred. Although the organization was not truly responsible for the formaldehyde crisis, they took responsibility because the blame was inescapable after Katrina (Veil & Anthony, 2017). The compounding crisis is critical within this discussion because many organizations experienced these effects during the pandemic.

According to Stoller and Steele (2020), corporations tethered to the financial markets were already in the midst of crisis. Before COVID-19 and its associated recession was even a speck on the horizon, there were “funding squeezes” throughout 2019 (Stoller & Steele, 2020,
In these “squeezes,” the Fed “injected hundreds of billions of dollars into repo markets to ensure proper liquidity and keep interest rates from skyrocketing,” which signaled the overall instability of the financial markets (Stoller & Steele, 2020, para. 7). The markets had businesses in crisis, which were further complicated by the compounding crisis of the pandemic. Considering the implications of a compounding crisis, it was reasonable to assume the organizations were floundering and likely began to drown with the onset of the virus. If stakeholders had witnessed the current crisis of many organizations as they strived to sustain their financial position, then hopelessness could set in as corporations shuttered their doors in forced lockdowns. The inherent responsibility that the organization might hold from its financial setbacks would certainly be cemented once the compounding crisis appeared.

Conversely, although anecdotal, it would not be out of reach to assume that the pandemic offered the initial crisis for many organizations, only to be followed by a compounding crisis. Hypothetically, given the loss in profits for many organizations, key employee lay-offs could drastically impact a business and be considered a compounding crisis. In one example, businesses in Lake Charles, Louisiana, were initially impacted by the pandemic in early 2020, then hit by Hurricane Laura in August 2020, only to be hit again by Tropical Storm Delta just six weeks later (Rojos, 2020). With thousands of residents still without homes, it was unimaginable to consider how organizations managed day-to-day operations, much less COVID-19 remote working restrictions. Suppose Veil and Anthony’s (2017) comments on responsibility held true. In that case, businesses might have to take responsibility for their decisions and actions during the initial months of the pandemic once the compounding crisis swept through. Those pandemic decisions were made quickly and without any historical guidelines on how to send unprepared traditional workers home to work remotely.
Like the pandemic, compounding crises could be global too. The 2020 presidential election in the United States and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, ignited by the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor certainly affected the nation and beyond (Turan, 2020). The outcome of the 2020 United States election affected businesses, just as race conversations impacted organizations (Simmons, 2020). According to Just Capital (2020), 86% of organizations wanted to increase their diversity and inclusion, yet only 11% set goals to reach those desires (Simmons, 2020). Each new crisis compounds the pandemic in a significant way, in that leadership is already attempting to navigate a monumentally unique situation when a compounding crisis (i.e., lack of diversity, political unrest), which deserves just as much attention, suddenly surfaces.

A compounding crisis might also be more personal. Dreger (2020) argued that although remote working had its benefits, that the sudden, immediate change from traditional to flexible work could cause fear and anxiety. The potential for an American corporation to be hit with the pandemic, lack of diversity, the outcome of the election, and an increase in stress within the workplace, was far too unrealistic. Which crisis gets prioritized, and how does that impact engagement with employees? The pandemic workplace was riddled with fear as the crises continued to compound and COVID-19 death tolls mounted.

A New Normal?

The compounding nature of the crisis moments in 2020, shifts in corporate structures, and the remote worker renaissance made it clear that the corporate world would never look the same. What seemed somewhat temporary early in the year became a conversation about establishing a new normal—an idea that seemed to spread like wildfire within the global workforce (Maragakis, 2020, para.2).
The new normal, a phrase used with propaganda like repetition by the media, seemed to push organizations across the country to normalize the new COVID-19 requirements (i.e., handwashing, 6 feet apart, isolate if symptoms arise, face masks) (World Health Organization, 2020). This new reality changed the global economy, health systems, governments, and the workplace in unprecedented ways (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Phrases like social distancing (i.e., maintaining a safe distance from non-family members) and lockdown (i.e., regulations against leaving the home) were now commonplace (Waizenegger et al., 2020), and the world found itself constantly navigating the personal and professional crisis. With a global crisis threatening every doorstep, there was an immediate need to address effective internal crisis communication with employees in every organization worldwide.

A Need to Explore

Given the apparent need to address the post-pandemic workforce, there is also a need to explore for answers. This is a new population, a hybrid mix of employees from both traditional and remote work. Leaders want to communicate effectively with this population, but the research to contextualize this effort is not readily available in one place. Different silos in and out of strategic communication offer insight, and this dissertation will take on the task of exploring the scholarship in search of clear connections amongst the research. Consider Sarah Patella, the New York City native now living life to its fullest in Lake Tahoe. She went on a vacation and could not come home. When she traded her heels for hikers, there was no blueprint to guide her success. Everything she did from the moment she opened her laptop on a kitchen table in her temporary mountain home was unprecedented, based on her knowledge and experience. But research exists. It just needs to be explored.
This section will explore the three significant bodies of research that will be explored in the research of this new normal: (1) remote workers, (2) internal crisis communication, and (3) employee engagement. With the current state of remote workers, internal crisis communication, and employee engagement introduced, the foundations of this interpretive analysis will illustrate the significance of the ever-widening gap in research.

**The Current State of Remote Work**

Since 1972, the world has been preparing for an explosion in remote work (Allied Telecom, 2016). Jack Niles, who was working remotely on NASA communication platforms, told co-workers he was telecommuting and, as a result, coined the phrase (Allied Telecom, 2016). From its humble beginnings with Niles, the remote worker population has incrementally evolved into a force of its own. Without clear guidelines, models, frameworks, or even best practices, most organizations waded into the remote worker world cautiously and with varying levels of trepidation. However, all of this hesitation came to an abrupt halt in 2020 when the effects of COVID-19 hit the workforce (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Suddenly, even organizations passionately adverse to the concept of remote work were scrambling to embrace and define a structure and a culture for the protection of their customers, businesses, and employees.

Considering that the world and its organizations are in crisis, there is no doubt that employees experienced both new freedoms and challenges in this new endeavor. Halpern (2004) argued that workplace flexibility was no longer optional. Over 15 years later, flexible arrangements were replaced with shelter-in-place orders, which ignited the long-awaited remote worker revolution. In an early look at pandemic data, Brynjolfsson et al. (2020) found that half of those who were employed pre-pandemic were working remotely post-pandemic. The pre-
pandemic population predominantly volunteered to work remotely (Versey, 2015) in order to
gain freedom, autonomy, a more positive work/life balance, and fewer hours on the road between
home and work (Delanoeije et al., 2019; Fonner & Stache, 2012; Golden et al., 2006). The pre-
pandemic remote worker may not have been trained, but they had the time and resources to
prepare their workspace and technology (Tietze & Nadin, 2011). Leaving the chains of their
workplace behind, pre-pandemic remote workers enjoyed the benefits of their positions (i.e.,
flexibility) but were challenged by the constant juggle of work/life, as the removal of the office
made it more challenging to disconnect (Delanoeije et al., 2019; Derks et al., 2016; Sonnentag et
al., 2008; Suh & Lee, 2017). Pre-pandemic remote workers had jobs that thrived in a remote
environment and independent personalities that flourished in the more isolated, home-based
location (Smith et al., 2018). On the other hand, post-pandemic remote workers had a drastically
different experience.

With cases on the rise, most employees were forced into remote work (Brynjolfsson et
al., 2020; Engle et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2020). Unprepared, these workers rushed home to
shared spaces in unsuitable conditions to take on multiple roles of employee, teacher, and
homemaker (Kramer & Kramer, 2020; McCarthy et al., 2020). Due to the pandemic, stress and
anxiety soared, not necessarily because of remote working conditions, but due to the fear of
infection and associated isolation (Usher et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). An entire organization
was hypothetically lifted from their traditional offices and isolated in their homes, whereas the
previous generation of remote workers had been specifically chosen for their role. Post-
pandemic remote workers left their organizations in crisis, which reaffirms that internal crisis
communication strategy must be implemented in a way this unique population can comprehend.
The Current State of Internal Crisis Communication

In order to implement effective crisis communication to employees, it is critical to evaluate current efforts and consider how these strategies align with the post-pandemic remote worker population. This discussion, rooted in the strategic communication discipline, originated in the need to communicate with internal populations within the workforce effectively. Although the workforce dramatically shifted during the pandemic, one of the most unique contributors to the panic was that not only did it affect everyone, but it changed the way we communicated on a daily basis. The pre-pandemic ideas about internal crisis communication must evolve for new populations, such as the post-pandemic remote worker.

Although a fresh perspective is needed post-pandemic, the pre-pandemic internal effort had drastically improved over the last two decades. Adams and Roebuck (1997) suggested that “little information about strategies for communicating with internal audiences exists” (p. 63). Just over 20 years later, research is brimming with content on the topic. What was once a shadow of external crisis communication is now found in discussions ranging from public relations to risk management. Scholars developed the opinion that “the neglect of internal communication is a dangerous strategy” (Adams & Roebuck, 1997, p. 64). Given that employees are an effective communication channel, the organization must be aware of the risk of under-communicating with their internal stakeholders.

Additionally, since one of the primary considerations in internal crisis communication is employee retention, it is integral to this discussion to explore the likelihood and reasoning behind why employees depart during crisis. In a 2009 study, the notion that employees were leaving organizations because of “social atmosphere, job content, work-life balance” was overturned (Meganck & De Vos, 2009, para. 1). The study showed that employees left organizations
because of career advancement and compensation (Meganck & De Vos, 2009). From a crisis communication perspective, conversations about advancement and financial reward would likely be deferred if the company is in crisis. Employees who were not confident about their future within an organization would be the first to leave during a crisis. If an organization places importance on the value of employees, then they need to implement strategic internal crisis communication to ensure employees are prepared before, during, and after crisis.

Although not a usual suspect in the internal crisis communication conversation, the antecedents, and goals of employee engagement and internal crisis communication continually aligned during research in this analysis. Although this topic will be analyzed and dissected in-depth, it is important to note that employee engagement, however, overlooked, aligned perfectly with an employee-driven approach to internal crisis strategy.

_A Common Thread: Employee Engagement_

During a review of internal crisis communication scholarship and pre-pandemic remote worker populations, employee engagement repeatedly surfaced as a common strategy for success. Although the connection appeared to be clear, there was not research available that connected internal crisis communication, through employee engagement, to most effectively communicate with remote worker populations. Given that this interpretive discussion seeks to enhance internal crisis communication, specifically in post-pandemic remote populations, there are several major challenges from a research perspective. First, there is a lack of scholarship connecting pre-pandemic remote workers and internal crisis communication. While there is significant research devoted to both topics, there is a gap between the two silos. Additionally, much of the organizational communication, employee communication, and crisis communication research overlaps, yet few studies have connected their contributions to the pre-pandemic remote
worker population. Second, given the shift in the post-pandemic workplace and remote worker population, much of the previous research on remote workers is outdated. Pre-pandemic remote employees and post-pandemic remote employees are drastically different. There is a gap and overall lack of research between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population, even though several related disciplines point to answers in employee engagement.

In trying to close the gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population, few common ideas were present. However, employee engagement and the tenants that create those experiences surfaced repeatedly in pre-pandemic remote worker research. Similarly, many of the goals identified in a successful internal crisis communication strategy were also driven by the same tenants of employee engagement. A common thread between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population was the need to engage and retain employees. Employees, the research suggested, were valuable. Their emotions and goals were also valuable and are critical to an organization’s ultimate success.

Employee engagement, a hot topic in employee communication and human resource management, is not often discussed in crisis. However, Pang et al. (2007) warned that organizations in crisis “could not afford to be in a position of low-engagement” (para.1). Organizations who entered crisis situations with low engagement not only suffered in navigating crisis but often lost employees during the process (Pang et al., 2007). Since most crisis communication research is externally focused, the majority of the internal research devotes time to managing what the employee might say during the crisis, rather than developing the crisis into a long-term engagement opportunity for employees. However, in the organization and employee communication studies, scholars studied employee engagement in-depth, with the employee
prioritized. Organizational communication prioritizes employee engagement, but that research does not directly connect to internal crisis communication. As we will discover, many research silos within this discussion prioritize employee retention, employee value, self-efficacy, and relationships, but none of the silos seem to speak to each other. At times, many researchers in strategic communication advocate for employee engagement, but few are collaborating outside of their specific branch of research.

Despite all of the disconnects and confusion within the research, most scholars were saying the same thing. From the perspective of organizational communication, Sorenson (2013) said that employee engagement increased retention and delivered higher productivity and profitability. Over in remote worker scholarship, Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) found a positive relationship between flexible work arrangement and engagement. Blacknell (2015) said that retention and employee well-being had to be integrated into crisis management efforts to result in a successful crisis outcome, while Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) reported that employees’ well-being increased when they were engaged. Employee engagement is vital in crisis management and is critical in the success of remote workers. Scholars advocated for employee engagement, both to succeed in crisis and to retain remote workers.

Since employee engagement could theoretically fill the gap, the next step was to either create a framework or advance a current framework that could be modified to apply to both crisis communication and post-pandemic remote workers. Designed through a lens of strategic communication, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) built the Zones of Engagement framework, which suggested that employees experienced engagement in 6 overlapping zones. According to Lemon and Palenchar (2018), employees experience engagement in 1) non-work-related experiences, 2) freedom in the workplace, 3) going above and beyond roles and responsibilities, 4) when work is
a vocational calling, 5) is about creating value, and 6) when connections are built (p. 3). These overlapping zones suggested that themes such as self-efficacy, relationships, trust, and value created engagement experiences for employees (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). Crisis communication scholars for managers to focus on relationships and self-efficacy in pre-crisis environments (Coombs, 2015a), while remote worker studies pointed to self-efficacy, trust, and relationships to create success for remote workers. This discussion will utilize Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement to bridge the gap between internal crisis communication and post-pandemic remote workers. Since this project is based on the crisis lifecycle, employee engagement will be an ongoing endeavor that also readies the team for crisis.

While employee engagement will fill the gap, this conversation is not without other gaps and challenges. Most of the topics in this discussion were void of research because the pandemic is happening now. We are dealing with a current and evolving topic, and the research will have to focus on patterns of the past, which can be applied to the future. In the next section, a summary of major challenges will be presented to acknowledge what we do not know and actively seek strategies to bridge those gaps.

### Summary of Challenges

Given all the challenges of this crisis-ridden time, the most significant issues in communicating in crisis to post-pandemic remote worker populations are addressed below. These challenges include a new workforce and the gaps in research, which fail to provide connections between areas of study critical to this discussion. The challenges culminate in the need to fill a gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population. Until the gap is closed, strategic direction cannot be offered to the marketplace.
Challenge #1: A New Workforce. A traditional workforce was uprooted from their office setup and instantly transported to an unprepared work environment. Given the pandemic restrictions, it was riddled with remote-working spouses, remote-learning children, and pets. Their ergonomic desks and customized chairs were replaced with a section of the kitchen table, which they likely shared with at least one other family member (McCarty et al., 2020). While previous generations of remote workers longed for home-bound flexibility, the pandemic generation of remote workers were unprepared, untrained, and, at times, unable to fully function within their homes (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Yet, since organizations had at least 50% of employees working from home, they needed to maintain their investment in employee engagement and communicate to their employees during crisis (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). While the pandemic itself could be considered an organizational crisis, many organizations were already experiencing crises of their own (i.e., mergers and acquisitions, natural disasters, or personnel crises) (Stoller & Steele, 2020). The initial challenge of a new workforce birthed the idea that traditional internal crisis communication strategies may no longer apply.

Challenge #2: A Gap in Research. The second challenge in this conversation is the lack of research connecting post-pandemic remote worker populations with internal crisis communication or even employee communication strategies. There is significant scholarship associated with telework, remote work, and flexible work situations within organizations, but as this discussion will reveal, the former, pre-pandemic remote work population had significantly different characteristics (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a substantial gap between internal crisis communication and both the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic remote worker populations. There is also a sizable gap between strategic and organizational communication strategies in how to manage remote worker populations because they are a completely new
community. The data that existed on the former population does not represent the new population, which widens the existing gap between communication of any kind and the post-pandemic remote worker population. In summary, the gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker is even more significant than pre-pandemic because the characteristics of the population are likely obsolete.

**Challenge #3: Lack of Employee Driven Strategy in Crisis Frameworks.** Throughout the review of literature in Chapter 2, it is clear that remote workers have had a presence in workplace communication research for decades. From both the psychological and human resource disciplines, the worker’s need was often prioritized over the organizational win (Hill et al., 2008a). Conversely, public relations was often much more concerned with an organizational win during crisis, and in many frameworks, often viewed employees as a public, on a long list of publics (Hill et al., 2008a). Bundy et al. (2016) agreed, identifying two main research perspectives concerning crisis: internal dynamics and managing external stakeholders (p. 1661). From the internal perspective, Bundy et al. (2016) found that most communication research studied an organization’s likelihood of successfully navigating a crisis. Although there is an enormous amount of insight to be gained from this scholarship, the research is less interested in saving the human and more interested in saving the business. However, employee-driven content is abundant in human resource and organizational communication because these silos tend to consider the cost of retention and turnover into their employee value. Given these three major challenges, this approach requires a unique process to connect the silos of research to establish common ground.
An Interpretive Approach

This unique process is a phenomenologically based interpretive analysis of the theoretical gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population. With the gap in clear view, a comprehensive exploration of strategic communication scholarship leads to three silos of relevant research: crisis communication, organizational communication, and remote worker communication. This dissertation presents the connective findings of all three silos, which continuously point to the prioritization of the employee and the importance of engagement.

Given the need to explore an entire landscape of scholarship, the work is rooted in the phenomenological tradition. The phenomenological design prioritizes the real, lived experience of a population and serves this study of frameworks well, considering its people-centered approach. Phenomenology is the study of what “is” and the study of “how we experience” a phenomenon (Smith, 2018, para. 3). In this case, the phenomenon is remote working. Like a prism, the experience can change anytime the environment or perspective shifts. Phenomenology and the shared experience of working remotely are key, gleaned from connected points of theory across the strategic communication footprint.

To provide a foundation for future study, an interpretive approach was chosen. Rooted in the humanities, phenomenologically based interpretive studies are “well-suited for exploring hidden reasons behind complex, interrelated, or multifaceted social processes” (Singh & Zhang, 2018, p. 54; Walsham, 1995). This analysis uncovers a hidden, yet common, strategy that connects remote workers and crisis, closing the gap. Singh and Zhang (2018) pointed to the value of interpretive work, especially in “context-specific, unique processes” (p. 54). This discussion demands the insights of multiple disciplines and fields to establish a realistic pathway.
for this unique population and its communication needs. We can not test a framework that does not exist. There is not a clear framework that connects internal crisis communication strategy and the post-pandemic remote worker. This approach is a phenomenological exploration of populations, prior research, and frameworks that breaks down established silos in order to modify a framework that is better suited to fulfill the needs of the post-pandemic remote workforce in crisis.

**A Modified Framework**

The discussion will first identify the gap and seek to define it based on available research. Second, employee engagement will be used to bridge the gap, specifically through Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement framework. The Zones of Engagement will be modified to enhance existing definitions referencing traditional workers and be updated with post-pandemic remote workers' challenges and needs. Then, the Zones of Engagement will be applied to Coombs’ (2015a) stage of crisis, which will offer insights on how to communicate during the entire crisis lifecycle most effectively. This multi-step, multi-faceted process is an ideal candidate for an interpretive approach, which will reveal the lived interconnections between research silos and establish a framework for practical application in the workplace. Although the dissertation will close the gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population, there is still a need to reach the marketplace to benefit these employees now.

**A New Strategy: R.E.S.E.T.**

Rooted in the modified framework, this new strategy, a mnemonic for relationships, empathy, self-efficacy, employee recognition, and training, will offer a practical guide to implementing these ideas into the post-pandemic remote workforce. According to Claeys and
Openghaffen (2016), there is a division between crisis scholars and practitioners. Although crisis communication research is abundant in the marketplace, Claeys and Openghaffen (2016) suggest that it does translate readily to the hands of the crisis manager. In order to effectively translate scholarship to practical application, Claeys and Openghaffen (2016) recommend bringing it directly to the marketplace in a simplified and condensed fashion. With this in mind, this interpretive discussion will conclude with a practical set of applications for the marketplace named R.E.S.E.T. With both a theoretical and practical component, the opportunity for post-pandemic remote worker success throughout the crisis lifecycle continues to increase.

**Purpose**

The overarching purpose of this dissertation is to establish a theoretical internal crisis communication framework that aligns with the needs of the growing and diverse post-pandemic remote workforce. With no available framework, the purpose will then be to define and identify the gap in research between internal crisis communication and post-pandemic remote worker populations. Secondly, a framework will be modified to bridge the gap and connect communication strategies with this population.

**Research Questions**

In this interpretive discussion, the research suggests a significant gap in research between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population. This dissertation will investigate, identify, and define the gap between these two topics using a multi-discipline approach.

RQ1: What are the gaps in the body of research between internal crisis communication and post-pandemic remote worker populations?
With a gap established, are there existing frameworks that could be modified to serve the post-pandemic remote worker population? What practices are needed to bridge this gap?

RQ2: Could current strategic communication models or frameworks be updated, modified, or adapted to better illustrate the opportunity to reach the post-pandemic remote worker population before, during, and after crisis?

The answers to these questions advance a current conversation about crisis management into discoveries about an emerging population and a new level of organizational crisis.

**Significance of Dissertation**

This discussion is timely and significant given the ongoing uncertainty of the virus and the expectation from organizations and employees that the remote work trend will continue post-pandemic (Wrycza & Maslankowski, 2020). In a 2020 Gartner survey, organizations believed that nearly 75% of their future workforce would be classified as remote workers. Given the 90% of New Yorkers still working from home in March 2021 (Haag, 2021), this becomes more and more realistic. This new majority would not necessarily consist of workers who had personalities, temperaments, and roles best suited for remote work. These individuals were former traditional workers who, by choice or by force, were now classified as remote workers.

Most importantly, the world is experiencing fallout from an ongoing pandemic, and organizations need to identify the most effective methods of both engaging their workforce and communicating in crisis. The intention is not to communicate when the next crisis hits. The intention is to communicate now in crisis. As compounding crises hit organizations, the need for strategic internal crisis communication will only intensify. Communication directed at this new audience will be integral to an organization’s success. This work can be applied to future
pandemics but can also be utilized in any crisis lifecycle environment, which is present in every organization across the globe.

**Definition of Terms**

Given the complexity of the conversation and the fact that many of these terms have evolved, definitions will be crucial to modifying a framework for use within the marketplace.

**Crisis**

A crisis can be defined as “a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is determined, turning point” (Crisis, 2019). A crisis can be global, organizational, or personal. Coombs (2015) defined crisis as, “A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 20). A crisis can be personal or professional and can impact one or many.

**Crisis Communication**

Crisis communication scholar Timothy Coombs (2007) defines crisis communication as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 20). This process happens before, during, and after a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2011; Seeger, 2006). In this dissertation, crisis is considered a lifecycle, an ongoing and cyclical pattern of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Coombs, 2015a).

**Crisis Lifecycle**

According to Coombs (2015a), the crisis lifecycle is a staged approach to crisis communication and management, which argues that the “crisis management function is divided into discrete segments that are executed in a specific order…and the lifecycle perspective reveals
that effective crisis management must be integrated into the normal operations of an organization” (p. 6-7). This ongoing process includes an unending cycle of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis and suggests that the next crisis is just around the corner (Coombs, 2015a).

**Employee Engagement**

According to Kahn (1990), employee engagement is the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). Employee engagement is allowing an employee to flourish in their role and within the organization.

**Internal Crisis Communication**

Fearn-Banks (1996) defined the goals of crisis communication as an “ongoing dialogue between the organization and its publics” (p. 2). Given that employees are one such public, internal crisis communication has a similar goal but is directly focused on internal stakeholders: the employees (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Internal crisis communication is a study of how to communicate before, during, and after crisis to the employee body.

**Remote Worker**

Although the term remote worker is popular today, dated terms such as telework, telecommuting or trendy terms such as flexible work arrangements, distributed work, mobile work, smart working, and work-shifting are synonymous within this discussion (Lister, 2020, para. 16; Kroll & Nuesch, 2017; Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Hill et al. (2008b) suggested flexible work arrangements could be defined as “ the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks” (pg. 149). This employee-focused definition, as opposed to an organizationally driven definition, will be used in this dissertation.
Traditional Worker

A traditional worker functions within the four walls of a traditional office during a normal 9 am – 5 pm, plus or minus several hours, work day. A traditional worker is assumed to have some sort of commute and is assigned to a specific place in a building with his co-workers. The traditional worker has a space that includes a phone, a computer, and the materials needed to work effectively within the office. This office likely has access to breakrooms and conference rooms.

Pre-pandemic

Pre-pandemic refers to the time period before the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the world. Although the virus impacted China in late 2019, some areas of the United States, in comparison, began lockdown in March 2020 (Neilson et al., 2020). Pre-pandemic ends with the onset of the virus, which will differ for different areas of the world.

Post-pandemic

The time period during and after the onset of the virus. Since the virus was still significantly impacting the world as of the date of this dissertation, post-pandemic will be defined as the onset, which will differ for different areas of the world (Neilson et al., 2020). Every minute after the onset of the virus will be considered post-pandemic.

The definitions of these terms will remain consistent throughout this dissertation to ensure continuity within this discussion.

Assumptions and Limitations

First, a primary assumption of this project is that the pandemic is far from over. Due to the evolving nature of the pandemic and its aftermath, it is safe to assume that the crisis will continue. Since this work is based on Coombs’ crisis lifecycle (i.e., ongoing cycle of pre-crisis,
crisis, post-crisis), we also assume that once the pandemic and its aftermath dissipates, the world will enter an extended post-crisis period, where organizations will continue to navigate the wreckage of the pandemic. With this insight in mind, the “new normal” (Maragakis, 2020, para. 2) and its remote workforce need a long-term plan. Different employees want different accommodations, and without set guidelines, the future is relatively uncertain. Communicating effectively with this population is a new frontier, based on the differences between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic remote workforces (Waizenegger et al., 2020).

In terms of limitations, there are many, given the lack of data about internal crisis communication in post-pandemic remote worker populations. Once the modified model is tested in future studies, considerations for differences in geography, gender, age/generation, culture, job type, family structure, marital status, personality type, and a number of other factors could be studied. Additionally, this discussion viewed internal crisis communication through employee engagement, which focused on employee-driven communication strategies delivered from the leadership team. With various other viewpoints available, other strategies could be considered to ensure that the organization would also thrive within this context.

Additionally, although social media and digital technology are a significant part of the conversation surrounding strategic communication and remote work populations, this dissertation intentionally omitted lengthy discussions on these elements. The focus in this effort is on a population of people and how to reach them in crisis. Although digital technology and social media would likely be used in practical application, this conversation will unveil theoretical connections to align organizational efforts in crisis communication strategically. There are many future opportunities for tactical applications that would allow organizations to implement these findings immediately.
Where Do We Go from Here?

A crisis is an opportunity. Sarah Patella, a New York City young professional, was not looking for a change, and yet, crisis happened. The opportunity transformed her professional and personal life and, as she suggested, “changed everything” (Haag, 2021, para. 16). Sipping coffee from her work space on her kitchen table in Truckee, California, was likely not one of her professional goals. However, the change brought a new opportunity to live differently. A shift from traditional work to remote work was her opportunity to reset. Although crisis can be unsettling, we can also view crisis as a “window of opportunity” or an opportunity to see a way to do things differently (Gomez et al., 2020, p. 404; Grewal & Tansuhaj, 2001). Having established a clear overview of the problem and opportunity, the next chapter will present a literature review, which will thoroughly examine the pre-pandemic world and highlight opportunities to make connections within the research gap between post-pandemic remote worker populations and internal crisis communication. Given the defined gap, the discussion will seek to install a bridge to connect internal crisis communication with this unique and evolving population. Although the world is weary, opportunity for positive change can rise up and create a culture that engages, encourages, and empowers, even in crisis.
Chapter 2: Searching for a Common Thread

Scholarship is clear that the remote worker is not a new idea. However, there is a new breed emerging in this post-pandemic world and a new normal. Their stories share a common theme: remote workers are not sure what they are doing, but they like the idea of this new normal. And while productivity and perspectives suggest that it is a good thing, there are many unknowns to consider.

This chapter helps to explain the reason for these unknowns through the convergence of different strategic communication starting points. These points help to inform a better understanding of the remote work population at this moment. Three areas are covered: pre-pandemic remote worker populations, crisis communication, and employee engagement. As we dissect the research in each of these areas, it is also essential to firmly root this scholarship in strategic communication. Since our intent is to communicate more effectively to remote workers throughout the crisis lifecycle, the core efforts must originate from strategic communication. With this in mind, this section will set the stage with another story from another remote worker, who is part of the undoing of the old and the reimagining of the new.

Where Do We Begin?

In Sarah’s story in the last chapter, the transition from high heels to hikers changed more than just her outlook on work. It changed her life. Work and place were radically altered for her and her organization. The changes experienced by Sarah find a similar expression in another remote worker's story. This one is from Matt. He is a husband, father, and marketer whose experience in 2020 further helps set the stage for situating the research and reason for this project.
She looked horrible. Broken, battered, and aging, but all Matt and his wife could see was vintage beauty. With enough room for two remote workers, two young children, and some hiking boots, the young couple shoved responsible adulthood aside to make room for Mabel, a 1976 Serro Scotty trailer. The pandemic had halted their corporate lives, and when given the opportunity to reset, they envisioned a tiny, aqua-colored remnant of the 1970s roaring down the open roads. No timeline and no rush, just adventure. With so many unknowns at work, at school, and in the community, the couple said they needed a project to stay sane during the pandemic, joking that “it was either the most reckless decision we ever made or the best decision ever – still not sure which” (Whatley, 2021).

A reckless decision? Maybe. Or, perhaps, a new option in a world that does not have specific rules yet. The United States had a taste of this unknown during the season after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Nobel laureate, Elie Wiesel, saw the post-9-11 workforce in the midst of crisis and lamented, “The aftermath of the terrorist attacks posed an acid test for employers, often fundamentally changing the employer-employee relationship. Now there is a before and after. Nothing will be the same” (Caudron, 2002, pg. 1). It seemed that way in 2001- horrific images of bodies, smoke, blood, and wreckage. According to Caudron (2002), the only thing that the over 3,000 dead had in common was that they had gone to work on September 11, 2001. Morrie Schechtman, a corporate culture consultant, also saw a before and after, suggesting, “Our belief that our institutions will somehow protect us has been shattered. That includes our nation, our local communities, and, yes, our workplaces” (Caudron, 2002, p. 2).

The post 9-11 outlook may have seemed unknown, yet, despite this bleakness, the world recovered. More people went to church, and fewer stayed late at the office, but there was not a
significant impact on work quality and productivity (Caudron, 2002). Even though the media warned of “the desperate need for everything from heightened background checks, video monitoring, and executive security to enhanced EAP services…,” very few of the “massive workplace changes predicted” in September 2011 ever materialized (Caudron, 2002, p. 3). The workforce continued as it had before, and insights about the pre-9-11 workplace still carried value even after the crisis. Workplace behavior did not drastically change.

In the same way, 2020 and the movement toward a post-pandemic world left people wondering if the world would ever be the same. Initially panicked by the sudden changes in early 2020, people like Matt have found a new rhythm. The schedule is not the same, but according to Matt, his productivity and engagement at work are stronger than ever (Whatley, 2021). Mabel, despite her flaws, breathed new life into Matt. And, as for job satisfaction, he said, “I can’t imagine ever leaving with an opportunity like this” (Whatley, 2021). Matt is in the midst of a crisis (i.e., ongoing pandemic), is happier than ever in his personal life, and has found a new purpose that renewed his commitment and fueled his productivity in his organization.

Crises have always happened. However, this recent crisis was significant because it impacted the entire workforce. Productivity is not dropping, but the return to “normal” is dramatically different from crises of the past. What we see in this historical moment is the ongoing rise and fall of the crisis lifecycle amidst an increasingly productive post-pandemic workforce that is more remote than ever before (Mischke et al., 2021). Harnessing this new breed of employee is the key to what may very well be a new era in business. If we can understand how to effectively speak through the crisis and impact this new contingent of post-pandemic remote workers, then organizations could step into a golden age of employee loyalty and satisfaction.
Research Foundation

In an effort to understand the complex conversation regarding internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population, it is essential to identify the evolution of these ideas and the conceptual participants relevant to this discussion. This is why the conversation begins with the exploration of pre-pandemic remote worker research, then shifts to strategic communication, and finally zeroes in on internal crisis communication, which uniquely intersects research from employee and organizational communication, which offers a more comprehensive understanding of the most effective way to communicate with post-pandemic remote employees during crisis. By creating a web of strategic communication relationships, we can see common and converging themes from which to connect the shared space between these disciplines, all of which contribute to a complete understanding of how to engage the remote worker population.

The remote worker population did not begin with the pandemic. The post-pandemic workforce will be made up of traditional and remote workers, who likely had no say in their work location preference. Some call for a return to normal, others for a new normal. But there is a sense that the characteristics of work have inexplicably changed, and the future of the workforce is undefined. Since crisis is an ongoing aspect (i.e., the crisis lifecycle) of workplace communication planning, we can utilize research pertaining to pre-pandemic populations and apply it to this interpretive discussion. This is where stories like Matt’s invite us to consider the future differently. He was working in corporate marketing, with long hours and high-profile clients, until the world changed. Now he is the unlikely owner of a Serro Scotty. Matt still works for the same organization but works at home, and soon, from the road. The pandemic offered an uncertain future, but one that Matt has decided to map out for himself.
For companies and remote working populations, this new reality is full of unknowns. But it is not entirely uncharted territory. This literature review is designed to draw foundational insight from the past in order to give context to the questions we face in today’s post-pandemic future. It will illustrate the complexity of the post-pandemic remote workforce based on previous research focused on both traditional and pre-pandemic remote populations. Even though little research is available about post-pandemic remote workers, much research is available about pre-pandemic traditional and remote populations.

In order to personify the post-pandemic workforce, we must consider the individual faces of this new population. They look like your neighbor, family members, and friends. They are making choices about how they will work because they can. Traditional workers might remain remote. Remote workers might begrudgingly go back to the office or might rejoice in a return to their quiet and childless cubicle. And then there’s Matt, gleefully logging on from Acadia National Park for a Zoom meeting. This new population has yet, as of Q2 2021, to define the way they will work, and most organizations have yet to outline clear expectations for their own traditional and remote work policies.

With clear coordinates on the audience, the next step of this review will launch into the major research efforts of strategic communication, more specifically, internal crisis communication. As we reach the midpoint of 2021, most research points to a continued uptick in permanent remote workers. Given the uncertainty within the post-pandemic workforce, which includes the post-pandemic remote worker, there is significant value in exploring how to communicate effectively throughout the crisis lifecycle. This population will likely remain in crisis and post-crisis for the foreseeable future. Given that the crisis lifecycle will begin again (i.e., pre-crisis), effective internal crisis communication will always be relevant within any
workforce (Coombs, 2015a). There is significant academic research in internal crisis communication that can provide a foundation to develop new strategies for the post-pandemic remote worker population. Understanding how organizations communicate to employees during crisis events will allow trends and patterns to emerge that will point to connections between strategies in internal crisis communication and employee engagement goals. The insights from this research will show that the desired outcomes of successful internal crisis communication strategies and the goals of employee engagement are nearly identical. Organizations want to communicate with their employees during crisis successfully, and they spend much of their pre-crisis and post-crisis efforts encouraging employee engagement. With this in mind, the final step in the literature review will be to summarize the research in employee engagement and its strategic alignment with effective communication, retention, and job satisfaction. Engaged employees are happier, healthier, and more able to communicate within the organization effectively.

This literature documents the critical components of employee engagement to fully bridge the gap between the post-pandemic remote worker population and internal crisis communication. The goal is to provide context and support for observing and bridging a dangerous gap in strategic employee communication within the remote worker population. This project will provide a pathway forward by providing a better understanding of the post-pandemic remote worker population and the strategic communication strategies used to effectively communicate during crisis. The research compiled in this review will establish a foundation for more effectively communicating and connecting with remote employees, which will benefit the marketplace before, during, and after crisis.
Pre-Pandemic Remote Workers

In this historic moment, there is a unique opportunity to explore an emergent population characterized here as the post-pandemic remote worker. There are two main areas of focus in current research about remote worker populations: employee-focused literature and organization-focused literature. In employee-focused content, scholars document the benefits and challenges for remote workers, while research focused on the organization prioritizes the benefits and challenges for the management of remote workers. To better communicate in crisis with the remote worker population, it is critical to examine the literature from both perspectives. The pre-pandemic remote worker will be part of the post-pandemic workforce and offers insights into the experience from an employee and management perspective.

Research showed that employees had a significant desire to work remotely, even though the challenges were real. According to Buffer (2019), when participants were asked if they would like to work remotely, at least some of the time, 99% said yes. Employees believed that they would be more productive at home and that their work/life balance would improve. Based on research reported by Kroll and Nuesch (2017), employees who worked from home had significantly increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover intention. Given the high price of turnover, working from home spared an organization the cost of rehiring and retraining new employees (Halpern, 2004). Employees who planned to exit their companies typically reduced their productivity, which decreased overall corporate success, even when the individual did not actually quit (Halpern, 2004). Conversely, satisfied employees shared their positive outlook with co-workers.

However, the realities of remote work were both positive and negative. According to Felstead and Henseke (2019), the myth was real, people loved remote work, but it came with
some pitfalls. The scholars reported, “While remote working is associated with higher organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and job-related well-being, these benefits come at the cost of work-intensification and a greater inability to switch-off” (Felstead & Henseke, 2019, para. 1). The Labor Force Survey, which included over 45,000 workers age 16 and above, found that voluntary work was higher in remote workers than traditional workers (Felstead & Henseke, 2019, para. 29). This study reported that remote work had incredible benefits, but the commitment to work often drifted to an unhealthy level. From an employee perspective, pre-pandemic remote workers enjoyed their freedom, but experiences were riddled with challenges.

Some of the challenges were related to personality. According to Smith et al. (2018), some personality types were more likely to succeed in remote workplaces. For example, using the Big 5 personality types as a reference (i.e., openness, conscientious, extraversion, agreeable, and neuroticism), an employee “high in extraversion can thrive in a teleworking context as either a full-time or part-time teleworker” (Smith et al., 2018, p. 61). While Smith et al. (2018) focused on matching personality types with communication channel preferences, his work also contributes to the diversity of the post-pandemic workforce. Some employees craved face-to-face interaction (i.e., openness), but those employees could be directed towards video-based communication tools rather than the telephone through careful management. MicroExec (2013) reported that 88% of employees increased the impact of discussions by video conferencing. Some personalities seemed better suited for remote work in the pre-pandemic world, but organizations could not pick the most well-suited employees when the pandemic hit. Research contributions about remote worker personalities provided significant insight into the complexity of the post-pandemic remote worker population (Smith et al., 2018). Although an extensive study on personality would provide additional insight into the development of this population, the goal
in this interpretive discussion is to acknowledge the complexity of this new workforce. Personality is just one differentiator and challenge for communicators.

Other differentiators within remote teams included time zones, communication styles, and cultural differences (Nancherla, 2010). According to Singh et al. (2017), the three disadvantages that telecommuters face when they work from home are “over work, continuous isolation, and inadequate tools” (p. 17). Modi (2019) agreed, suggesting that, “Loneliness and isolation are the largest reported concern amongst remote workers and its effects can go further than affecting just the individual. Some symptoms of isolation include increased stress levels and bad decision making” (para. 6). From the perspective of an employee, this is a risky investment. In any workplace, there are challenges that plague employees, however as scholars suggest, there are opportunities for organizations to identify these opportunities and prioritize their resolution.

Not surprisingly, organizations had challenges too. Since deficient technology plagued the early adopters of remote work, a significant amount of research focused on how to provide solutions for this population. However, as technology and its availability evolved, the conversation changed from an organization’s ability to technically support remote work to the ability to manage remote workers. Despite the best efforts of employees, there was still an air of suspicion surrounding the remote roles (Adcock, 2021). Yet, even the management research became outdated as digital natives grew and other technologies became available (i.e., videoconferencing, mobile) (Tomasian, 2019). Now that an entire workforce was working from home, the old articles on management were relatively obsolete. Organizations were no longer managing the 1%, while the other 99% showed up at the board meeting. However, in both pre-pandemic literature and post-pandemic marketplace discussion, one idea emerged countless
times: employee engagement. Across the internet, industry experts and communication
consultants offered their tips to keep post-pandemic remote workers engaged. Engaged workers
were happy and loyal workers who went to bat for an organization in crisis. Since everyone was
in crisis in 2020, engaged, happy, loyal remote workers were a popular topic.

However, as already noted, remote worker employee engagement was not a new topic.
Already a documented challenge in the traditional work environment, employee engagement
would have to filter through a remote communication channel and affect the remote user enough
to engage them in the organization’s activity. Nearly thirty years ago, Kahn (1990) defined
employee engagement as “the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in
engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally
during role performances” (p. 692). Kahn’s Employee Engagement Theory suggested that there
were three psychological conditions needed in order for an employee to be their complete self at
work: meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990). According to Kahn (1990),
meaningfulness was the desire to have meaning instilled in their work. Second, safety
questioned if the employee could be themselves without negative consequences. Third,
availability measured the employee’s ability to bring their full self to work at a given time.
Kahn’s (1990) component of meaningfulness resonated with Bandura (2001), who provided
insight into the work performance of pre-pandemic remote workers with the Self-efficacy
Theory. Bandura (1978) defined self-efficacy as “a judgment of one’s ability to execute a
particular behavior pattern” (p. 240). Based on a model built on the self-efficacy theory, Staples
et al. (2006) found that “remote employees’ self-efficacy assessments played a critical role in
influencing their remote work effectiveness, perceived productivity, job satisfaction, and ability
to cope” (para. 1). In other words, employees who were confident in their ability to succeed in
remote working were successful. Staples et al. (2006) suggested that organizations who prioritized communication that instilled confidence, or autonomy, were more likely to foster a remote employee’s success.

As we witnessed this with Matt, an employee’s definition of success can evolve. Previous success might have been a big win for a marketing client, a huge promotion, or an industry award. New success might be completing projects at work so he can finish painting Mabel’s cabinets. The goals change as the employee changes. Hard workers can look very successful, but harder workers are not necessarily engaged workers. According to Young (2018), Kahn’s findings “separated engagement from everyday hard work. A diligent employee, who is able to harness their full self, will display loyalty and ownership….an engaged employee will tackle tasks without being asked because they want to” (para. 6). When Matt purchased his 1976 Serro Scotty, he was harnessing his full self. The decision to purchase a vintage camper might have seemed odd or different. It was different. Given the freedom to manage their time, there are new options on the table for remote workers. Matt could bring his full self to work for the first time in his life. Remote worker engagement could be as simple as acknowledging the full person, whether on or off the clock.

Transferring the theoretical to practical, Kahn (1990) challenged managers to “…approach employees as true partners, involving them in continuous dialogues and processes about how to design and alter their roles, tasks, and working relationships –… make it safe enough for employees to speak openly of their experiences at work.” (Young, 2018, para. 8). In true remote worker populations, especially those that are permanently remote, the ability to communicate continuously with leadership was crucial to the outcome of an engaged employee. Given that remote workers have more authority over their time management, employee
engagement is a strong indicator of both personal and organizational success. Despite the decades of conversation and research, remote employee management and engagement seemed almost like an organizational unicorn.

While pre-pandemic research offers insight into the complexity of the post-pandemic population, there are significant unknowns even today. This research reminds us that the post-pandemic remote worker population is exceptionally diverse but that most of them genuinely love working from home. However, all of this content was pre-pandemic. All of this research was produced before children were sent home from school. It was produced before social distancing was a commonplace phrase. When the masses left their cubicles in early 2020, organizations were at a loss as to how to manage and engage employees from home. The post-pandemic remote worker population is even more complex than the pre-pandemic population. Organizations and employees are in the midst of crisis, and if ever there was a time for consistent crisis communication, this is the moment. In order to successfully navigate current and future crises, organizations must effectively communicate with this complex group of post-pandemic remote workers.

*Establishing Roots in Strategic Communication*

With post-pandemic remote workers as the primary audience, this interpretive discussion seeks to establish a foundation of research through a lens of strategic communication. Internal crisis communication, a subset of strategic communication, should be the best area to study, but very little research exists that provides frameworks or strategies for organizations in terms of communicating to remote workers before, during, and after crisis events. Since the research certainly does not include communication strategies directed at post-pandemic remote worker populations, it is then important to expand the search to other silos within the strategic
communication discipline. This discussion will begin by mapping a course between the roots of strategic communication and crisis communication to identify other avenues within strategic communication, where we can glean information that could potentially fill the gap between internal crisis communication and remote worker populations.

**Figure 1**

*Classification of research within Strategic Communication*

![Classification of research within Strategic Communication](image)

Note. Information derived from *From public relations to strategic communication in sweden: The emergence of a transboundary field of knowledge* by Falkheimer & Heide, 2014 (doi:10.2478/nor-2014-0019).

In order to understand how to communicate to post-pandemic remote worker populations, research across many fields and disciplines should be examined to cultivate a comprehensive approach to communication to remote worker populations throughout crisis. In other words, given the gaps separating internal crisis communication and remote worker populations, it is important to look in unlikely places. Starting with the foundations of strategic communication, this section will identify the major silos within this discipline, which will provide context as patterns emerge. As illustrated in Figure 1, the pathways between strategic communication and
internal crisis communication are intersected by several silos, including organizational communication, public relations, external crisis communication, and marketing. It is in these intersections that answers can be found to provide the most robust strategies to effectively communicate to remote worker populations throughout the crisis lifecycle.

The discipline of strategic communication houses several overlapping components that are all relevant to the post-pandemic marketplace. Falkheimer and Heide (2014) defined strategic communication as a “conceptual and holistic framework that …integrates organizational (i.e., internal) communication as well as aspects of management theory and marketing” (p. 123). They argued that the organizational (i.e., internal) communication component of the overarching strategic communication discipline was segmented into three fields: public relations, organizational communication, and marketing communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). While organizational communication was rooted in speech and communication scholarship (Tompkins & Wanca-Thibault, 2001), public relations originated in mass communication (Heath, 2011, 2013), as opposed to marketing communication, which was founded in the business administration tradition (Dahlen et al., 2010). On the path between strategic communication and internal crisis communication, it is important to note that all three of these fields, in addition to others, produced a significant body of crisis research. However, internal communication landed within organizational communication, whereas public relations and marketing housed a more external crisis communication view (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). Yet, according to Cheney and Christensen (2001), the imaginary fence between internal and external communication is unrealistic since there is a constant integration between the two communication types. If an organization created and distributed an external marketing campaign online, internal populations would be impacted as much as the anticipated external population. Conversely, if an internal
employee group shared their feelings about the organization with an external networking group, then the reputational threat would quickly evolve from internal to external. The overlap between internal and external communication lays the groundwork for scholarly contributions in crisis communication. The research within these sectors all anchor back to strategic communication, which provides an opportunity to expand the search into other silos within strategic communication for more relevant research pertaining to internal crisis communication and remote worker populations.

Even though silos exist, they do so with purpose. Examining the work in each of these silos contributes to a complete understanding of how communication operates in the marketplace. It would be short-sighted to consider crisis without the media, the internal stakeholder, and the customer. Although these topics come from different silos, they are critical to a comprehensive understanding of communication in crisis. Falkheimer and Heide (2014) name three silos within strategic communication, but in this discussion, we will focus on two: public relations and organizational communication. While marketing contributes to the overall discussion of how to position and deliver products during crisis, it is outside the scope of this specific project. Conversely, public relations and organizational communication speak directly to crisis strategies and their impact on the employee body.

**Silo: Public Relations**

The majority of the research on crisis communication falls under one of Falkheimer and Heide’s (2014) other two more externally focused categories: public relations. This body of research is heavily laden with scholarship on external crisis communication or how the world will perceive an organization during and post-crisis. Focused on restoring reputation and putting out fires, the public relations study of crisis communication analyzes response effectiveness and
the speed of resolution in organizational crises in an attempt to offer insight on handling the next event (Coombs, 2007, 2015a, 2015b; Fearn-Banks, 2016; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). Public relations research looks at crisis communication from the perspective of protecting the reputation of an individual or organization (Coombs, 2015b). According to Marsen (2019), public relations/corporate messaging (i.e., controlling communication in and after a crisis) and crisis prevention are the two main frameworks found within the public relations silo. While there is a wealth of knowledge, it is important to remember that much of this content focuses on the external audience’s opinion of the organization. In this silo, the public perception is primary, and the employee’s role is to improve the public perception. Although crisis communication research in the public relations tradition is mostly externally focused, there are still real lessons to be learned from the research. In Fearn-Banks’ (1996) lengthy theoretical discussion of crisis communication, he offers only a short section about how to communicate to employees during crisis. Although we can gain insight from external crisis communication perspectives, much of the employee-related, internal crisis communication research is housed within the organizational communication silo.

**Silo: Organizational Communication**

While much of internal crisis communication research was born from external crisis communication (i.e., public relations), there are some crisis scholars who rooted their efforts in the bevy of research related to organizational communication. Although strategic communication’s public relations silo is focused externally, the organizational silo has a much more internal focus. Focused on a complex and evolving workforce, organizational communication houses the majority of the conversation on internal crisis communication. Within this silo, research also emerges on topics ranging from employee engagement to
organizational identity. Since the goal of this interpretive dissertation is to close the gap between post-pandemic remote worker populations and internal crisis communication, it was essential to understand the different arms of strategic communication so that we can look for answers in the most unlikely places.

Organizations have made great strides towards a more integrated crisis communication strategy, combining ideas from several areas of strategic communication to develop an overall perspective on crisis communication in the workplace. In one example, Weick (1979, 1995, 2001, 2009) studied sensemaking in crisis, a common topic in organizational communication. Additionally, Neill et al. (2019) discussed organizational identification and communication climate in terms of organizational change. Christensen et al. (2008) found that standard practices in corporate communication were unfit for communicating in crisis events. Corporate communication is focused on delivering one message to many different audiences (Christensen et al., 2008), but one message is not enough. The employee body, like the post-pandemic remote worker population, is a vast sea of individuals, and a singular corporate message cannot speak to the diversity of the modern-day workplace. Crisis commentary is also found in research rooted in crisis prevention, which also originates from organizational communication traditions. Based on ideas of issue management, crisis prevention focuses on risk management and effective communication to prevent crisis from happening (Boin & Lagadec, 2000; Jaques, 2014; Normandin & Therrien, 2016). Crisis prevention also includes research on pre-crisis employee training, which readies an organization to fare well in crisis situations (Chewning et al., 2013; Strauss & Junkman, 2017). Additionally, within the crisis prevention sector, scholars explore how ineffective employee communication can throw gas on an already fiery crisis (Herndl et al., 1991; Linde, 1988; Marsen, 2014; Smith & Keil, 2003; Taylor & Van Every, 2015). Crisis
prevention, from an organizational perspective, develops theory and strategic practices to steer clear of crisis. Crisis, specifically in terms of the internal stakeholder, is found throughout organizational communication.

The majority of the foundational research in this project is based in strategic communication but within two separate silos. With a wealth of knowledge and research about employee communication under organizational communication and a significant body of research under public relations (i.e., external crisis communication), the solutions to communicating to internal populations are at our fingertips. With a clear understanding of the established research silos in strategic communication, it is safe to move forward with the understanding that crisis scholarship could potentially originate from either silo. The core objective is to communicate with the post-pandemic remote worker population effectively, and both silos share the same goal of effective and dynamic communication. Therefore, any content within the strategic communication sector could potentially fill the gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population. With strategic communication at the helm and the post-pandemic remote worker illustrated, the next step will offer scholarship and insights from the other side of the gap: crisis.

**Crisis Communication**

Although many scholars dance around this established gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population, minimal research points to solutions to fill the gap. In order to find connections between remote workers and crises, this section will explore crisis communication research in an effort to make connections that lead back to the remote worker population. Although remote workers are not the central audience of any of these studies, a slice of the post-pandemic remote workforce is present. As we have
discussed, former traditional workers are a part of this new workforce. Research in internal crisis communication focuses on traditional employees, but connections can still be made to contribute toward the gap. This section will begin with an overview of core crisis communication tenants. It will then expand into the more niche research field of internal crisis communication to highlight the theories, frameworks, and strategies that support the field today.

**Origins of Crisis Communication**

The foundations of crisis communication, on which internal crisis communication was built, is based on three main stages of crisis management, which include pre-crisis (i.e., prevention and preparation), crisis, and post-crisis (i.e., response and learning) (Coombs, 2015a; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Seeger, 2006). Pre-crisis, according to Fischer et al. (2016), produces strategy where “long-term risk reduction measures are established” and resources are aligned to manage an imminent incident (p. 12). Crisis happens, and the goal during this segment is to survive and minimize the impact (Coombs, 2015a). Post-crisis evaluates what has happened and ties up all of the loose ends in order to create an actionable effort to rebuild post-crisis (Coombs, 2015a; Fischer, 1998; Seeger, 2006). These stages have been applied to organizational crises, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and countless other crisis events. The most important idea within these stages is that they are considered a lifecycle. According to Coombs (2015a), organizations are in one of the stages at all times. This lifecycle is used as a reference point throughout this project and provides a starting point for understanding theories and crisis communication models.

Often considered the father of present-day crisis communication, Coombs (2015a) developed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to theoretically link crisis stages, crisis types, and crisis response strategies, with the overarching goal focused on
reputational protection. The theory is rooted in the Attribution Theory, which suggested that humans search for the cause or explanation in events, especially negative and unexpected occurrences (Weiner, 1985, 1986, 2006). Coombs claimed there were three types of crisis clusters: victim, accidental, and intentional (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). In the victim cluster, “the organization is also a victim” of a natural disaster, rumor, workplace violence, or product tampering (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). In the second cluster, the accidental, the organization’s actions unintentionally resulted in a crisis, which often included challenges from stakeholders, technical or equipment-error accidents, or technical-error product recalls (Coombs, 2007). Lastly, the preventable cluster, the cluster that carried the most severe reputational threat, described organizations that “knowingly put people at risk, took inappropriate action, or violated a law or regulation” (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). Preventable crises included human-error accidents, human-error product harm, organizational misdeed, or deceptions, with no injuries, organizational misdeed with management misconduct, and organizational misdeed with injuries (Coombs, 2007). Based on these three crisis types or clusters, Coombs (2007) suggested that crisis managers could then anticipate the amount of crisis responsibility a public would assign to the organization in the early stages of a crisis.

After assigning an initial crisis responsibility level, crisis history and prior reputation would be considered, which Coombs believed acted as intensifying factors (Coombs, 2001, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2004). Based on the SCCT, Coombs (2007) also reported that “emotions operate on a parallel track to reputation and affect behavior intentions as well” (p. 169). The more attribution a public assigned to an organization in a crisis, the greater the occurrence of anger and frustration. As tempers flared, sympathy declined for the organization. According to Coombs (2007), “Negative emotions can cause stakeholders to lash out at an
organization (i.e., engage in negative word of mouth) or to sever interactions with the organization” (p. 169). In short, if a public attributes blame on an organization in a crisis, then they are more likely to spread a negative perception and less likely to support an organization moving forward (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Jorgensen, 1996; Rudolph et al., 2004). The parallel between reputation and emotion is linked by crisis responsibility, which offers connections to internal communication strategy. While this discussion might seem externally focused, it is critical to remember that employees are stakeholders. If a public, or employee, attributes blame on their organization in a crisis, then they are more likely to spread a negative perception and less likely to support, or perhaps remain with, an organization in the future (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Jorgensen, 1996; Rudolph et al., 2004). The employee stakeholder has a perception that impacts the perception of others. If Matt gets frustrated at work and tells his friend, then the friend could develop a negative perception of the organization.

Negative perceptions abound, but foundational crisis response strategies attempt to repair the damage. According to Coombs (2007), crisis response strategies were based on the idea that an organization, in order to be considered responsible, must be accountable for their actions and that the response strategy is their method of accountability. The three primary response strategies in crisis were identified as denial (i.e., separating the organization from the crisis), diminish (i.e., lessen the organization’s connection to the crisis), and rebuild (i.e., offer aid for victims) (Coombs, 2006). Denial strategies were most effective in victim crises, diminish strategies were most effective in accidental crises, and rebuild strategies were applied to preventable crises in order to achieve the most successful post-crisis outcome (Coombs, 2007). A secondary strategy, bolstering, was identified to remind the public of the good qualities of an organization in crisis. These response strategies served as effective methods of reducing the
reputational damage, especially if the crisis type and other critical factors had been evaluated. These response strategies are elements of internal crisis communication since they are used on all stakeholders, including employees.

Matthew Seeger (2006) widened the crisis response conversation to a dialogic approach, based on a discourse of renewal, instead of just focusing on reputation. Based on his four stages in crisis management (i.e., prevention, preparation, response, and learning), Seeger’s ten best practices covered (1) communicator’s roles in policy development, (2) pre-event risk assessment, (3) creating a dialogue with the public, (4) connections between policy makers and the public, (5) using honesty in messaging, (6) collaborating with credible sources, (7) providing access to the media, (8) communicating with empathy, (9) accepting uncertainty, and lastly, (10) providing messaging with self-efficacy (Seeger, 2006). The goal was the redemption of the organization, in addition to immediate reputation repair.

Like Coombs, Seeger identified emotional aspects within these practices that played key roles in the resurrection of the organization in the eyes of its publics. Specific to this discussion, Seeger’s (2006) insights into listening, openness, empathy, and self-efficacy speak directly to the internal crisis communication conversation. In terms of listening, Seeger (2006) suggested that positive relationships pre-crisis would set the stage for the successful management of a crisis and a successful renewal post-crisis (Coombs, 1999; Ulmer, 2001). The ability to listen and create a dialogue with publics opened the door for established communication pre-crisis. In terms of empathy, Seeger found that “if the public sees an expression of genuine concern and empathy, it has more faith that the actions being undertaken or recommended are appropriate and legitimate” (Seeger, 2006, p. 241). The idea that compassion could be unprofessional is unfounded and could worsen the reputation of the organization if avoided. Lastly, messages of self-efficacy, or
the confidence an individual holds that they can meet specific goals, assisted in establishing a sense of control within publics (Seeger, 2006). In other words, the public gains the ability to act or do something while the crisis evolves. According to Seeger (2006), messages of self-efficacy need to make recommendations to reduce harm and offer different types of activities to accomplish this task. Additionally, self-efficacy could also be achieved by suggesting actions that do not have a direct benefit, like displaying the United States flag during a terrorist attack on the country (Seeger, 2006). Seeger (2006) claimed that “messages of self-efficacy need to be constructed carefully so that the reason for the action is clear so that they are consistent, and so that the recommended action is meaningful” (p. 242). This link between emotions and crisis continues to develop in internal crisis communication. Internal crisis communication prioritizes communication with the employee and other internal stakeholders. Research in internal crisis communication wants to create successful outcomes in crisis through strong employee communication, often overlapping with other themes in organizational communication.

**Internal Crisis Communication**

Since the goal of this conversation is to communicate with post-pandemic remote worker populations more effectively, the primary bank of research should be found under internal crisis communication. However, as we discovered in the previous section, while there is a significant body of work dedicated to how the outside world (i.e., customers, media) perceives the organization reputationally, the discussion of internal crisis communication, or the strategies employed to manage and retain employees during crisis, are less concrete. However, key scholars, like Coombs (2015), championed the importance of employees during crisis and said, “To protect an organization from crisis harms, we must comprehend how a crisis inflicts harms on an organization” (para. 62). By examining the research focused on internal crisis
communication, the ability to unlock the integral components that link to remote worker populations becomes more evident.

While most historical research contributes to the external crisis discussion, the investigation into the value of prioritizing the internal population (i.e., employees) has increased. If the employee body is viewed as an instrumental resource to help navigate the crisis, instead of being circumvented, their contribution can be monumental. According to Adamu et al. (2016), “Organizations must put employees at the center of their crisis responses during crisis” (para.33). Ma (2019) agreed and suggested that “an organization should take different approaches when it communicates with internal publics vs. external publics in a crisis” (p. 57). In order to fully understand the value of this unique stakeholder population, it is helpful to look specifically at the voices and frameworks within internal crisis communication.

Theoretically underpinning much of this communication research is the Elaboration Likelihood Theory, which is based on the idea that humans receive messages in two ways. This theory suggests that a message is either quickly judged based on a previous association (i.e., positive or negative) or is subjected to a lengthier process (i.e., elaboration) to scrutinize the information. According to Petty and Capcioppo (1986), the second route takes more time and creates a lengthier shift in attitude or beliefs. Employee receivers could react in quick judgments during a crisis, which could be more difficult to undo from an organizational perspective. In order to craft a more favorable employee outcome, communicators need to identify channels that would encourage employees to take their time and scrutinize the information.

Given the threat of snap decisions to a population, Roger’s (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory points out a concerning factor. When an internal population is presented with a crisis, they, like external populations represented in SCCT, form an initial crisis response. The
theory, which considers how new ideas penetrate a community, suggests that snap decisions might be adopted quickly by a potentially influential minority within the population (Rimer & Glanz, 2005). When a new idea is introduced, a minority will accept the idea, then once 20% of the population is on board, approximately 70% will follow suit (Rogers, 2003). According to Rogers (2003), some individuals will not ever accept the new idea. From the perspective of crisis communication, this theory assists in assessing how individuals will respond and if they will accept new ideas. Additionally, Roger’s (2003) research suggested that using agents of change, or influencers, to diffuse the new idea could speed the acceptance. If the grounded theory holds true for the employee body, then the goal of initial acceptance would be 20% of the employee population. However, the importance of the accepted message is critical to the distribution and acceptance of the message. Understanding the influential components of internal crisis communication strategy could be pivotal in bringing that 20% on board with the right message.

Similarly, the Social Cognitive Learning Theory sheds light on what shapes behavior. According to Bandura’s (2001) theory, humans and their surroundings are constantly interacting, and this interaction is what shapes behavior. Three components that influence behavior are observational learning, outcome expectations, and self-efficacy. Observational learning suggests that if individuals witness another individual performing an action and receive positive results, they are more likely to replicate the behavior. Second, in outcome expectations, if an individual believes the merits of performing a behavior outweigh the pitfalls, then they are more likely to engage in the behavior. Last, self-efficacy suggests that people are more likely to engage in a specific behavior if they feel like they have the “necessary skills and capacity to do so” (Bandura, 2001; Rimer & Glanz, 2005). From the perspective of crisis communication, this
theory suggests that role models need to be involved in instructing publics and that the benefits of performing those behaviors need to be evident. Additionally, based on the self-efficacy component, individuals need to believe that they have the ability and capacity to perform the behavior. These components are all part of the theoretical basis behind internal crisis communication. From here, several themes emerge that highlight specific components of a successful internal crisis communication strategy.

Ravazzani (2016), who championed employees during crisis situations, showed that managers needed to recognize “the important role of employees as internal communicators and external corporate ambassadors in crisis situations” (para. 44). Similar to an external crisis communication strategy, one of the main themes in an internal crisis communication strategy is honesty and authenticity in corporate crisis messaging. Meer and Verhoeven’s (2014) study explored the benefits of honest and authentic employee communication, reporting that “emotional signals, shame, and regret, embedded in crisis responses may affect corporate reputations by reducing feelings of anger and by increasing the acceptance of the organizational message” (para 34). In other words, shame and regret, presented in a genuine way, could open the ears of an employee. If employees do not have information, or the information offered seems unreliable, distrust could quickly seep into the employee pool. If Roger’s (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory is added to the discussion, the stakes get higher. If 20% of the employee population begins to distrust management, Rogers’ (2003) theory suggests that another 70% will follow. The stakes are high, and employee crisis communication is vital.

Organizations need to consider their approach and be ready and have the resources to push their plan into action. Employees want to receive crisis communication, and then they want to see those promises materialize. A CEO may not be able to promise job security or pay raises;
rather, the CEO might have to be alarmingly realistic (i.e., authentic and honest). Regardless, research showed that honest and authentic communication was key, and the resulting action proved most beneficial to post-crisis turnaround (Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). According to Kim et al. (2019), “When an organization reveals a crisis directly to its employees, the employees may assign less blame to their organization for the crisis and, in turn, evaluate the organization and situation positively” (para 64). The benefits of credibility and authenticity are nearly unending in internal crisis communication.

In many cases, the President or CEO will deliver the crisis communication to the masses. However, according to a study by Latre et al. (2018), it was less critical who delivered the message and more important that it was consistent and authentic (Latre et al., 2018). Although it might not matter who delivered the information, the speaker does need to understand the population. As discussed, the employee body is often diverse, and in this case, Latre et al. (2018) suggested that multicultural organizations must be aware of the cultural backgrounds in their company. Communication can only be effective if the manager understands not only the employee’s perspective, which included their language and values (Ravazzani, 2016). Not only are there potential language barriers, but cultural customs and inherent values must be considered, especially in heightened times of crisis.

In addition to authenticity and honesty, relationships are another key component in internal crisis communication. Understanding the employee from a relational perspective will aid in communicating to that employee during crisis. Managers need to understand how their employees operate pre-crisis so that they can navigate changes post-crisis. According to Lee (2017), “Quality relationships can, in the midst of an issue, substantially impact employees’ communicative behaviors and thereby prevent and minimize threats to an organization” (para. 1).
Each employee’s background and cultural lens in which they see the world must be considered in building the internal strategy. If manager and employee relationships minimize fallout in a crisis, then specific components of a strategy that speak to this effort must be present in the internal crisis communication strategy. “Even if companies develop deep trust relationships with their employees before a crisis occurs, it is necessary that they implement factual communication and concrete actions to give credibility…” (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015, p. 332). Ayoko et al. (2017) developed the idea further and suggested, “It is imperative for managers to have skills in identifying key employees’ emotional states and reactions to crisis” (para 4). The conversation quickly evolved from delivering the right messages to training managers to know their employees to deliver the right messages.

From the leadership and management perspective, a relationship can combat a negative initial crisis response reaction from employees. Zagelmeyer et al. (2018) agreed suggested, “an employee’s reaction mainly depends on how bad news is communicated and how individuals are treated by management” (p. 103). Through their study, not only did Zagelmeyer et al. (2018) find a link between communication and emotions in a crisis (i.e., specifically the merger and acquisition process) but also suggested that the “magnitude of the response” hinges on the event intensity and the “emotional regulation capacity” (i.e., the ability to self-regulate intense emotions) of the employee (p. 102). Once the employee reacted to the communication, their attitude and overall professional performance could shift, which could have positive or negative effects on the outcome of the crisis (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018, p. 102). Zagelmeyer et al. (2018) concluded that relationship elements, such as openness, honesty, and frequency, were directly connected to an employee’s emotional reaction (i.e., positive or negative). Without these efforts
in authenticity and relationship, employees are uninformed, which breeds uncertainty. Zagelmeyer et al. (2018) stated that employees rarely forgave extended periods of uncertainty.

If communication fails and the rumor mill activates, the messaging becomes much more difficult to control. Strandberg and Vigso (2016) said, “If rumors and false information circulates among the employees, more information must be given” (p. 114). If the information that is disseminated does not feel credible to employees, then they begin to gossip and either lose trust, create fictional outcomes, or even leave the organization. The need for internal crisis communication is evident to ensure the retention of the employee body and harness the employee voice as part of the employee army post-crisis. While most organizations have good intentions of disseminating information in crisis, there are some barriers to effective communication that must be considered.

**Communication Barriers in Crisis Management.** When attempting to effectively communicate, there will always be barriers to success. However, research has identified barriers that often derail crisis communication efforts. Strategically avoiding these barriers will be critical in navigating the organizational crisis. Although this discussion is focused on organizational internal crisis communication, there is much to learn from emergency management professionals and scholars on how best to communicate between crisis response teams (i.e., police, rescue workers, paramedics, local government) and publics (i.e., victims, volunteers) (Fischer et al., 2016). Crisis communication leaders could easily be compared to assigned crisis managers within organizations. Fischer et al. (2016) reported that “barrier-free communication is crucial for successfully managing a crisis” (para. 2). Manoj and Baker (2007) identified three categories of barriers in crisis communication: technological (i.e., user issues with technology), social (i.e., issues/differences among individuals), and organizational (i.e.,
issues between/within organizations). The concepts in these categories can be applied to internal crisis communication to outline the components that must be addressed to communicate to populations within an organizational crisis.

Technological barriers included infrastructure failure, non-acceptance of technology by crisis responders, the use of different technology (i.e., conflicting data formats that reduce the effectiveness of information exchange), and social media usage (i.e., rumors, verification and quality of information, lack of use within organizations) (Fischer et al., 2016). From an organizational perspective, each of these barriers within the technology sector is undoubtedly relevant. From infrastructure failure within organizations to the digital rumor mill, organizations have experienced much of the same barriers in communication with their internal populations.

Fischer et al. (2016) studied barriers from the perspective of communication between organizations within a crisis (i.e., Red Cross and FEMA), but the parallels are relevant between divisions of any organization. The authors cited organizational differences (i.e., people, structures, processes, policies, motives), insufficiently developed relationships between organizations (i.e., lack of trust, lack of information sharing, absence of overarching management), and location and resource issues (inadequate data sources in the crisis area, limited communication resources, insufficient communication training) (Fischer et al., 2016, p. 8).

Present throughout crisis communication research, Fischer et al.’s (2016) third barrier to effective crisis communication revolved around differences in people. This barrier stifles communication because of diversity (i.e., language and cultural barriers, lack of trust between responders in unfamiliar situations), unmet requirements within the situation (i.e., message interpretation, message design, decision making), and information-related problems (i.e.,
information overload, insufficient information, low confidence in data, inconsistent data, conflicting data). Fischer et al. (2016) reported that social barriers surfaced most often in confusing situations with incomplete information.

**A Necessary Convergence**

As we discovered in the roots of strategic communication, crisis is found in several silos. The research that we have originates from public relations, organizational communication, and even from scholars outside of strategic communication that focus on emergency management. Since this project discusses organizations, employees, and crises, nearly any strategic communication study could apply to this research. But our focus is to communicate with post-pandemic remote workers during the crisis lifecycle more effectively. By tearing down the walls of these silos, we are able to see the commonalities. The commonalities say that the employee is key to organizational success and crisis survival.

**The Common Thread**

At the center of internal crisis communication stands the employee. The employee is valuable. The employee is worth retaining. The employee is unique in their knowledge and gifts. The employee can steer a crisis into a positive or negative direction. The employee is influential. The employee has power over reputation, morale, and potentially the success of his co-workers. The employee is the common thread. An employee’s actions and communication during crisis could be the difference between crisis success and failure.

**Why Employees Matter to the Organization**

Before progressing any further, it is important to acknowledge that employees are a stakeholder group and that they actually matter. Their attributes are unique, and their interests, beliefs, talents, and opinions are diverse. In this next section, we will monetize the value of an
employee and how their retention is worth the effort. With this established, contributors to success will be analyzed, and themes will emerge that will prove critical to employee success. Employee success is organizational success and, perhaps, even crisis success.

**Employees Are a Valuable Stakeholder Group.** While many stakeholder groups are discussed in organizational and public relations literature, one of the most influential groups is the employee body. Frandsen and Johansen (2017) first suggested that employees might not be just internal stakeholders but could potentially hold multiple relationship roles within the organization (i.e., customer, stockholder). One of the most important considerations, in terms of internal populations, is that a stakeholder group “is not a homogenous group of people” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 352). Like any group of people, employees could be sub-categorized by any number of traits, tasks, or functions, but there are some common elements to this stakeholder group. Based on a breakdown by Frandsen and Johansen (2017), employee stakeholder groups differ from other groups in that they 1) have a unique relationship, 2) have unique stakes, 3) they have a unique identity and degree of identification with the organization, and 4) have a relationship as both a sender and receiver of internal crisis communication (p. 352). Employees are unique stakeholders with a specific value that should be acknowledged in a similarly unique way.

While much of this body of research is based on employee significance, most scholars assume that employee value is understood. According to the 2016 Human Capital Benchmarking Report, the Society for Human Resource Management (2016) estimated that organizations spend $4,129 on each new employee. Yet, the cost of losing an employee is far greater than just finding someone new. Bliss (2000) suggested that the cost of turnover was approximately 150% of the employee’s salary. Therefore, if an organization loses a
$100,000 employee, then the total cost to rehire would be $150,000, based on the cost of the employee leaving, hiring costs, training costs, and lost productivity costs (Bliss, 2000). Employee value should be considered from a monetary perspective to understand the loss within an organization when managers fail to retain employees.

Employee costs are relatively straightforward. A new employee requires recruitment (i.e., advertising, screening, interview time), and the length of recruitment varies depending on the value placed on the position (Davis, 2019). Training and fixed costs, such as salary, benefits, and a portion of “physical plant” costs (i.e., building and office costs), add up to total employee expense (para. 10). From a more subjective point of view, Half (2019) suggested that there are emotional expenses, which can often adversely affect overall organizational health and growth. For example, a top-selling sales team member, who belittled and berated his team members, might have been an asset from the sales side and a liability in terms of emotional expense. Half (2019) said, “Emotionally expensive team members can drain enthusiasm, passion, and productivity – factors with consequences for company culture and business growth” (para. 8). Although the employee pool is a mixed bag, employees are indeed a necessary expense in organizations, given that most companies rely on real people to complete activities.

Reporting strictly from an accounting perspective, Davis (2019) suggested that “when all employee costs are subtracted from the employee’s assets, the remainder is the employee’s value” (para. 3). Depending on the position, assets can be more challenging to quantify. While sales professionals or factory workers deliver actual assets, many workers (i.e., IT, marketing, human resources) deliver knowledge and contribute in a unique way. Net income can be divided by the number of employees, but that does not take into account position, effort, effectiveness, or
productivity (Davis, 2019). It is merely an average number for the employee body and does not examine the employee as an individual asset. If a shoemaker makes 100 shoes, then the asset amount is clear, yet an individual employee’s contribution within a corporation is difficult to quantify.

Even if a monetary amount can be calculated for an individual’s worth, it cannot quantify the full effect of impact if an employee resigns. One employee loss can sometimes devolve into an employee turnover wave, intensified by employee friendships and networks within the organization and reactions to similar complaints about management, vision, or work environment (Half, 2019). Employee value is too often glazed over in organizations and the associated research. Keeping value at the forefront reminds organizations that loss impacts our world, both financially and emotionally. Losing a valuable employee is a crisis, and considering the effort organizations devote to mitigating crises, it can be assumed that any internal organizational strategy should, at least in part, aim to retain.

**Contributors to Employee Success.** In order to retain, employee success must be an integral component within the organizational strategy. In the quest to create an environment of employee success (i.e., retention and job satisfaction), research spills across different disciplines. From human resources to organizational psychology, scholars and practitioners weigh in on how to capture this audience and encourage them to reach their professional potential. From the public relations viewpoint, research reveals how employees experience success through engagement based on the components of internal communication.

**Employee Engagement and Meaning Making.** One of the most influential areas of research in employee success is employee engagement. According to Walden, Jung, and Westerman (2017), employee engagement, driven by internal communication strategies, will
increase organizational commitment and retention. The connection between public relations and employee engagement is not a new conversation, and its roots can be seen in research over the last thirty years (Taylor & Kent, 2014). From internal crisis communication to corporate social responsibility, researchers found within the study of engagement that organizations had more of an understanding about creating a co-creational space (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). By definition, the co-creational approach values an environment where all levels contribute to meaning-making, which “is the process of how people construe, understand, or make sense of life events, relationships, and the self” (Ignelzi, 2000, p.5). In terms of this discussion, the co-creational approach advocates for a workplace that values all voices and contributions from all levels of the organization. This type of environment within the workplace cultivates employee engagement.

Definitions of employee engagement have evolved as well. Kahn (1990) defined employee engagement as an employee’s expression of themselves “physically, cognitively, and emotionally” (p. 694). Welch furthered this idea with the phrase “organization engagement,” which she defined as a dynamic state in which Kahn’s vision was fulfilled and influenced by internal communication practices (p. 337). While Kahn’s view dealt with attaching an employee to their job (i.e., position loyalty), Welch (2011) inspires a more fluid, ever-changing vision, where the attachment was tethered to the organization as a whole (i.e., organizational loyalty). Employee engagement, although defined differently across disciplines, is considered a key to turnover reduction and overall connection to the workplace, which drives job satisfaction. Yet, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) suggested that “limiting employee engagement to role performance prevents a sophisticated understanding of the concept and meaning behind employee engagement” (p. 143). By applying Heath’s (2011) zones of
meaning to the meaning-making process, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) developed a framework (i.e., Zones of Engagement) to better understand the path and benefits to employee engagement.

Heath (1993) initially suggested that meaning was derived and communicated through terministic screens, which were first defined by Burke (1966) as a system, driven by terms and language, that shaped a person’s perspective. Once reality was shifted by these screens, then they become zones of meaning since specific ideas, terms, and meanings were relevant within that reconstruction (Heath, 1993). According to Heath (1986), once these screens were in place, “we no longer perceive reality without the intrusion of terministic screens” (p. 85). Based on this understanding of how meaning is made, another connection is made through Albu and Wehmeier’s (2014) case study of zones of meaning during a bank crisis in the UK. According to the study, the bank attempted to communicate to multiple stakeholders in a transparent way, which resulted in confusion and unrest (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). However, if the bank had addressed “a common zone in stakeholders’ multiple zones of meaning,” then the outcome might have been different had the organization committed to “clarity and insight in the organization’s communicative actions” in crisis (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014, p. 129). This shared meaning, experience, or zone is monumental to creating meaningful messages in the workplace.

From the more practical public relations perspective, the zones of meaning offered the ability to craft targeted communications based on the individual perspectives within a larger group. Welch (2011) suggested that internal communication created roads to employee engagement by fulfilling both core emotional and surface (i.e., professionally driven) needs. Derived from Heath’s (1993) zones of meaning, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) labeled engagement “a strategic process that results because of the zones of meaning, the places where
meaning is created through communication” (p. 147). Even though employees experience reality in a unique way, patterns emerged, which resulted in the development of their framework, Zones of Engagement (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018).

**Zones of Engagement.** Lemon and Palenchar (2018) identified six emergent themes that are relevant to the discussion of employee engagement. The zones of engagement are the ways that employees experience engagement at work, based on Lemon and Palenchar’s 2018 study, and include: 1) non-work-related experiences at work 2) workplace freedom 3) going above and beyond roles 4) work as a vocational calling 5) creating value 6) building connections (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 147). The zones of engagement offer the “opportunity to re-conceptualize employee engagement from a public relations scholarship lens to better explicate how meaning is created from shared experiences” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 153). The shared experience is key to the idea that common messages could be delivered to create employee engagement.

**A Shared Experience: Employee Engagement**

In each section of this literature review, there was a repeated recommendation that showed a common strategy and goal between successful remote workers, internal crisis communicators, and organizational leaders. Although there were not any studies or frameworks that connected post-pandemic remote workers and internal crisis communicators directly, again and again, scholars pointed to the tenants of employee engagement. On one side, scholars who studied remote workers championed trust, relationships, and self-efficacy (Bandura 1978, 2001; Kahn, 1990; Staples et al., 2006; Young, 2018). On the other side of the gap, crisis communication scholars used many of the same strategies to successfully navigate crisis (Ayoko et al., 2017; Coombs, 2015a; Latre et al., 2018; Lee, 2017; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015; Rimer & Glanz, 2005; Seeger, 2006; Zagelmeyer et al., 2018). Remote workers and employees in crisis-
ridden organizations need the components that are key to experiencing employee engagement in order to be successful. In other words, to be successful throughout the crisis lifecycle, post-pandemic remote workers need to experience engagement. Employee engagement has the ability to both retain remote workers and successfully navigate a crisis.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Although there is an abundance of research in internal crisis communication and employee engagement, the current scholarship focused on remote worker populations is more lean, and direct connections were not available within the existing literature. Remember Matt, our pandemic-fueled do-it-yourselfer? There is little research about his post-pandemic remote work or the best way to communicate with him while he is on the road. Additionally, there is little research about the retention of remote workers. According to Matt, “I stay here because I still see long-term growth opportunities. Despite all the challenges … my org has really done a great job to financially tighten up while protecting staff and reducing layoffs. This matters and I’m grateful for that” (Whatley, 2021).

It is safe to assume that most remote workers likely have a reason why they stay, but due to the pandemic’s timeline, they have not yet been asked. However, by reviewing existing theories, studies, and research that impact these specific topics, conceptual bridges could be identified. These provide necessary insights and next steps into the future of strategic communication, specifically in communicating effectively in crisis to an ever-increasing population of remote workers. With a broader understanding of the post-pandemic workforce, the evolution of internal crisis communication, the value of employee stakeholders, and the need for employee engagement, the next section will propose a solution to fill this critical gap in research.
Although many of these veins of research clearly collide, the conversation surrounding internal crisis communication does not theoretically connect to the post-pandemic remote worker population. Organizational communication speaks to the challenges and benefits of remote workers, but what happens in a crisis? Crisis communication scholarship speaks directly to strategically motivating the internal employee population, but without specific guidance for remote employees, especially post-pandemic remote employees. Research would suggest that organizations have a clear responsibility to connect to this unprepared yet growing population of workers, to not only retain but to nurture. In the next chapter, the gap will be more clearly outlined, and frameworks will be identified to connect the rising population with clear strategies for communication. The marketplace has an opportunity to retain the Matt’s of the employee pool. He is a beloved employee who admires his company and just cashed in his savings to succeed professionally and live out his dream. Crisis is here. We have to find a way to keep Matt engaged. Filling the gap between the post-pandemic remote worker population and internal crisis communication strategies will foster success in crisis and retention in employees. Now, to fill the gap.
Chapter 3: Defining the Gap

There is an established and significant gap in scholarship between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population. Upon examination of the existing research in both internal crisis communication and pre-pandemic remote worker populations, employee engagement surfaced as a key strategy in the success of both crisis and remote worker relations. Employee engagement produced retention, job confidence, job satisfaction and even increased the bottom line (Coombs, 2015a; Staples et al., 2006). In crisis, the components of employee engagement better-prepared employees to create a more successful outcome for the organization and contributed to post-crisis retention (Coombs, 2015a). Employee engagement bridges the theoretical gap between internal crisis communication and post-pandemic remote workers.

With this understanding, this chapter will further define the gap and the recommendation to bridge it with employee engagement. If employee engagement bridges the gap, then a more specific framework will be required in order to link internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote workforce. While Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement is an excellent framework for organizations to consider how employees experience engagement, it does not currently speak directly to the two sides of our gap: internal crisis communication and remote workers. This chapter will fully define the gap, redefine the Zones of Engagement framework to include remote workers, and pave the way to modify the redefined framework for crisis. Once again, there is real humanness behind this gap. As we begin to close the gap between internal crisis communication and the remote worker population, allow Jill’s experience to broaden the importance of this endeavor.
Where Do We Begin?

Jill was ready to quit. She loved her job and her boss, but after a discouraging year filled with heartbreak, personal setbacks, and sports injuries, she counted up her savings and was ready to hit the road. She had it all mapped out. First stop Idaho, then a few weeks in Montana, head north to Washington, south to Oregon for at least a month, but leave September open, in case the Astros rallied to snag the pennant. She would sell the house, quit the job, buy some new hiking boots, and step into 40 with her eyes set on the horizon. But the plan fell apart. When she resigned, her boss begged her to try remote working. She did. Headed to the Pacific Northwest, but working for an organization on the East Coast, she could clock-in in the mornings and reserve the afternoons for adventure. Mountain biking, hiking, exploring, baseball, she started to find her passion again, all the while remaining engaged with her organization. “My business partners told me they had no idea I had even been gone. All of my work was done on time with zero issues. My boss told me repeatedly that aside from not seeing me every day, nothing had changed” (Hauswald, 2021). All because someone saw value in a woman who had lost a vision of value for herself. Jill still works remotely today and has no intention of ever leaving her company. And when the road calls again, she will be ready. Employee engagement, even in the midst of a personal crisis, can change an employee and an organization for good.

In October 2012, Hurricane Sandy, the fourth-worst storm in United States history, ripped across the Jersey shore, shredding the last remnants of summer in its wake. With the sky still dark and churning and the streets overflowing with chest-deep water, Marsha Hedgepeth had a decision to make (Hudson, 2012). Her shift in the New Jersey’s Community Medical Center’s emergency room would start soon. Hedgepeth’s decision was nothing short of heroic. She swam over 200 yards through icy storm waters and still reached the hospital hours before her shift
(Hudson, 2012). Hedgepeth later told NBC News, “Can’t isn’t in my vocabulary, so I knew I was going to make it” (Hudson, 2012, para. 2). Yet, as she stood facing those flood waters, right before she took the first step, an enormous amount of employee engagement must have existed. While it could have been her paycheck, or even sheer will, that coaxed her into the water, employees do not swim the length of 4 Olympic-sized pools if they are disengaged from their organization. Engaged employees, even in the midst of crisis, are determined to find their way.

A process must exist to create engagement, despite the stage of crisis. In order to engage the remote worker population before, during, and after crisis, a simple, yet multi-step process, must be considered. This chapter will seek to bridge the gap between current, internal crisis communication efforts and the post-pandemic remote worker population using employee engagement, specifically Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement as a foundational framework. In order to accomplish this, the Zones of Engagement will be redefined to ensure a clear connection with the remote worker population. Second, this phenomenological approach will apply the framework to stages of crisis and adapt the Zones of Engagement to identify prescriptive opportunities for engagement throughout the crisis process.

**The Gap**

There is a plethora of research on both internal crisis communication and remote worker populations. However, the majority of content anchored within internal crisis communication considered either the strategies of office-based leadership or the behaviors of traditional, office-based employees. With the identified gap between internal crisis communication and remote worker populations in mind, two factors contribute based on historical research. First, employee engagement is not prioritized in existing frameworks within internal crisis communication. Second, remote workers and traditional workers are not the same populations. The assumption
that traditional, office-based employees and remote worker populations are similar is undeniably flawed. Moreover, pre-pandemic remote workers are not the same as post-pandemic remote workers. Unpacking this gap exposes the weaknesses within the existing research both in internal crisis communication and post-pandemic remote worker populations.

**Employee Engagement and Crisis are Aligned**

Scholars clearly established that employee engagement increased retention and delivered higher productivity and profitability (Sorenson, 2013). Employee engagement is a known antidote to low morale, turnover, and even economic crisis. According to Sorenson (2013), organizations with engaged workforces “recovered from the recession at a faster rate” (para. 11). In human resources, business, and organizational communication sectors, employee engagement is a key attribute to a successful business.

Employee engagement is essential in the 2020 pandemic work environment. When the majority of employees are new and untrained remote workers, engagement can assist, not only in the transition but in the long-term success of the organization. In a 2020 study on the influence of remote work on employee engagement, scholars Weideman and Hofmeyr found a positive relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee engagement (para. 5). Specifically, Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) found that flexible work positively impacted the “overall employee well-being,” which was actually an antecedent to experiencing employee engagement. In other words, flexible work arrangements provided well-being, which enabled the employee to connect to the workplace in new ways. Engagement is essential, yet the majority of internal crisis communication scholarship does not prioritize it or integrate its importance. Additionally, most models and frameworks are not designed to retain employees but rather to communicate. The goal of most internal crisis communication efforts is to deliver consistent
information, as opposed to a responsibility-driven approach of communicating through encouragement in dark times.

Yet, the goals of internal crisis communication and employee engagement align. According to Bararia (2018), internal crisis communication should “provide timely, accurate, and clear information to prevent inaccuracies and rumors” (para. 6). However, accurate communication was just the starting point, as employee retention, productivity, and well-being should also be integrated into strategic crisis planning (Blacknell, 2015; Holtom et al., 2020). Engaged employees showed increased loyalty, productivity, and above and beyond-type behaviors within the organization (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Engaged employees were autonomous, had a strong sense of purpose, and had high levels of job satisfaction (Shuck et al., 2017; Zhong et al., 2015). Results of successful internal crisis communication and employee engagement strategies both resulted in increased loyalty, productivity, and overall employee well-being. Strategically, these efforts are both reaching for the same goals and are intrinsically aligned.

The Post-Pandemic Remote Worker is Unique

In an effort to bridge the gap between internal crisis communication and remote workers, it is critical to understand the differences between traditional employees, pre-pandemic remote workers, and post-pandemic remote workers. Although there are documented differences between traditional and remote workers in terms of employee engagement, the divide continues to widen as the population expands. It is also important to acknowledge how these populations differ in general. If the two populations were relatively congruent, then it would be reasonable to assume that observations made about employees in terms of internal crisis communication strategy would be consistent with remote worker populations. However, given the incongruence
of the two populations, a shared experience would be unlikely. To summarize the discussion in
the literature review, remote workers obviously differ from traditional workers in that they work
outside of the office. Remote workers predominantly control their own schedule and allocation
of resources, in addition to managing their own work/life balance (Allen et al., 2015). With this
autonomy comes new challenges with technology issues, distractions at home, and seclusion, but
despite these drawbacks, remote workers generally increase productivity and job satisfaction,
which often had the result of increased retention (Dimitrova, 2003; Golden, 2012; Kelliher &
Anderson, 2010; Mazzi, 1996; Sheehy, 2008; Smith et al., 2018).

Initially, flexible work plans were implemented to decrease commute times and increase
the life component of the work/life balance (Chen & Fulmer, 2017). According to Kurtessis et
al. (2017), when employers ignored the work/life balance of employees, turnover, and
absenteeism significantly increased. Van Ommeren and Gutierrez-i-Puigarnau (2011) found a
strong connection between “commute time and absenteeism,” while Zhou et al. (2017) connected
daily commutes to increased stress. Employees were tired of spending their days on buses, in
cars, and on trains, and it was significantly impacting both their home life and their mental
health. Remote work was a relief. Although the “death of the office” idea loomed over the
workplace, the boom never came to fruition (Maragakis, 2020, para. 2). The growth of the
remote worker population was rising, but organizations like Yahoo and IBM reversed their stance
on flexible arrangements and brought their teams back into the office (Moyer, 2013). In an
internal Yahoo memo leaked to the press, the company said, “To become the absolute best place
to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-
side” (Moyer, 2013, para. 3). At that time, all Yahoo flexible work arrangements were dissolved,
and all previous freedoms were forgotten. The remote worker world seemed possible for some
and unlikely for most others until the early spring of 2020 when the pandemic sent workers fleeing from their offices into the safety of their homes. However, unlike the pre-pandemic population of remote workers, the post-pandemic population was a mass of unprepared workers expected to log on from home without guidance or training.

In Waizenegger et al.’s (2020) study, the scholars painstakingly compared the lived experience of remote working pre- and post-pandemic. Given the sudden requirements for remote working, regardless of job type, training, or desire, the remote population had a distinct before and after experience. Waizenegger et al. (2020) summarized their findings into nine dimensions, including choice, population, motivations, preparation, space, responsibilities, well-being, mobility, and social interactions (p. 4). From the perspective of choice, pre-pandemic workers made a voluntary decision to pursue remote work (Versey, 2015), while post-pandemic workers were forced into adopting the effort by shelter-in-place orders (Walker et al., 2020). Those chosen to participate in the pre-pandemic workforce were selected by job and personality types (Kossek et al., 2006), but post-pandemic remote workers were sent home without resources or training (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). While the major distinctions are listed in Figure 2, one of the keys to their differences is the increased stress and isolation. Remote workers face isolation, but during lockdown, isolation rose to an epic level (Von Gaudecker et al., 2020). Additionally, other components of the pandemic, specifically remote-learning children, lack of ability to get supplies, fear over the virus, and overall concern about employment, often derailed the post-pandemic remote worker (Waizenegger et al., 2020).
### Figure 2

**Summarized Comparison of Pre- and Post-Pandemic Workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Pre-pandemic</th>
<th>During COVID-19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>Enforced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivations</td>
<td>Life/Work Balance</td>
<td>Comply with Restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparations</td>
<td>Time to plan</td>
<td>Little time to plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Shift from office to prepared home office</td>
<td>Shift from office to unprepared and unsuitable workspaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>Consistent roles with traditional work</td>
<td>Multiple professional and domestic roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>Positive and negative</td>
<td>Initial anxiety and stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>Freedom to interact</td>
<td>Restricted due to COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction</td>
<td>Professionally limited, but personal unlimited</td>
<td>Limited to household or videoconferencing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Multiple Conceptualizations of Workplace Flexibility

To fully conceptualize a post-pandemic remote worker’s challenges and communication needs, it is essential to define the multiple perspectives within the marketplace that often overlap in remote work. Although a component of workplace flexibility, remote work is not synonymous with the term. The evolution of workplace flexibility and its conceptualizations shed light on the realities of remote work and its implications on employee engagement. Hill et al. (2008a) identified two main conceptualizations within workplace flexibility scholarship: an
organizational and worker perspective. First, the organizational perspective prioritized flexibility within the organization and then, as a secondary measure, considered the employee (Hill et al., 2008a, 2008b). For example, an organization could use contract staff, as opposed to full-time employees (Huang & Cullen, 2001), or techniques, like job rotation or worker teams, to keep production costs low (Gittleman et al., 1998). These pro-organization strategies could benefit employees and corporations, or they could prioritize organizational objectives over the needs of the employees. Hill et al. (2008a) offered the example of a remote work program that was designed to save building costs but in turn provided more flexibility for employees to volunteer within their region. This type of organizational flexibility was intended to help the organization but had residual, positive effects on the employees.

The worker perspective is the second conceptualization of workplace flexibility, which alternatively prioritizes the individual employee (Hill et al., 2008a). In this conceptualization, employees chose how and where they spent their professional time, which illustrated an organization’s commitment to an employee’s work/life balance (Hill et al., 2008a). In other words, this was a conceptualization that employees had a life outside of work. Similar to employee engagement results, Hill et al. (2008a) found that organizations that prioritized worker flexibility also saw increased motivation, loyalty, and engagement from their workforce (p. 151). This whole employee perspective, rooted in positive, employee-centric human resource tradition, could offer employees significant flexibility, which according to Galinsky et al. (2004), ultimately benefited the corporation.

Based on Hill et al.’s (2008a, 2008b) two conceptualizations, it was clear that remote work could originate in either the organizational perspective or the worker perspective. Whether the conceptualization aligns initially with an organization or the worker, the outcome could
benefit both. While the organization perspective readied the entire corporation to be flexible, the worker perspective “is to enhance the ability of individuals to meet all of their personal, family, occupational, and community needs” (Hill et al., 2008a, p. 151). Hill et al. (2008a) reinforced that “byproducts” of invested efforts in the worker perspective were engagement, efficiency, and productivity (p. 151). Therefore, the primary difference between conceptualizations was whether the organization was designed to weather and respond to outside forces by its own strength or if it depended on the prioritization and ability of its employees to “self-regulate” their own workload (Hill et al., 2008a, p. 151). In the organizational perspective, the organization is prioritized, but in the worker perspective, the employee is essential to the organization’s success and survival. In this discussion, workplace flexibility and remote work will be defined from the worker perspective.

In alignment with the worker perspective, Hill et al. (2008a) defined workplace flexibility as “the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks” (p. 152). Although some remote work looked exactly like Hill et al.’s (2008a) definition, other work was driven from the organizational perspective. In other words, it was less about the employee’s needs and more about the organizational goals. In order to create a structure that engages remote employees in internal crisis communication, it is imperative that organizations are focused on the success of the employee. With this in mind, some jobs are fundamentally more suited for remote work, which allowed for more of a worker perspective. However, with entire organizations completely and permanently remote during the pandemic, it was not an option to allow remote work in only the well-suited positions. Although not fully explored in this discussion, there is yet another gap in research, where the less-suited remote roles still need to house engaged employees. This discussion asserts the idea that
workplace flexibility was a complex concept before the pandemic and is even more complex as organizations navigate this new frontier.

Part of Hill et al.’s (2008a) argument on workplace flexibility included a framework connecting antecedents of flexibility to workplace flexibility, which then effected work-life fit, which then influences an employee’s vitality in many areas of their life. Specifically, vitality showed the impact that workforce flexibility could have on family roles (Crouter, 1984; Frone, 2003; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Grzywacz & Bass, 2003; Grzywacz & Butler, 2005; Grzywacz et al., 2007; Hill, 2005; Hill et al., 2008b; Voydanoff, 2002, 2007). In essence, specific characteristics feed the success of workplace flexibility, which impacts work-life fit. For example, under the heading of home and family characteristics, employees have different factors, including marital status, children, and total household income (i.e., single-earner or double-earner) (Hill, 2008a). If a divorced male employee had three elementary school-aged children at home during the pandemic, then their characteristics would look vastly different from a dual-income earning married couple with no children. Each employee’s workplace flexibility is comprised of different characteristics, which contribute to the work/life balance they need to have vitality in integral parts of the lives.

In Figure 3, it is clear to see how these components work together to ultimately create vitality in several areas. Therefore, the lynchpin in this framework is the prioritization of the employees and the multitude of characteristics, both from the employee and organization, that impact the work/life fit.
The worker perspective, which prioritized the worker over the organization, is key. These unique employees and the characteristics they each bring into the workplace make an impact on their work-life fit, which solidifies the engagement they feel within their organization (Jacob et
al., 2008). Although Hill et al.’s (2008a) framework considered remote workers and their ultimate engagement and satisfaction, it also further defined the important personal components based on the Family Life Course Theory. While this theory is applicable to many conversations in remote work, the timeliness of this idea is unavoidable. The Family Life Course Theory articulates the complexity of the evolution of a career and all of the forces that impact it—historically, biologically, and socially (Moen & Sweet, 2004). As family needs and responsibilities shift, sub-groups (i.e., age or gender) are impacted differently, which impacts their work/life fit (Moen & Sweet, 2004). This continuum of work/life is ever-changing, and employees have experienced that firsthand during the pandemic.

In yet another example of a framework connecting remote work and employee engagement, Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) presented the components of remote worker engagement through a human resources lens. As seen in Figure 4, three components must be present to successfully implement and manage remote workers: define and communicate the policy, receive buy-in from management, and create an enabling culture for remote workers (i.e., a culture that supports remote workers’ specific needs) (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020, p. 15).
With the three key criteria (i.e., communicate, buy-in, and enabling) completed, Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) reported a positive effect on the engagement enablers listed in Figure 4, which had a “direct impact on employee engagement outcomes,” including productivity, performance, commitment, and discretionary effort (p. 15-16). This framework connects the remote worker to employee engagement in a straightforward and practical way, in addition to confirming many of the discussion points from Hill et al.’s (2008a) worker perspective on workplace flexibility. With a strong connection between employee engagement and the remote worker population, the quest continues to identify the remaining gap to connect to internal crisis communication.

Through all of this discussion, the gap seemed to narrow at some points and widen at others. While research identified a clear connection between engagement and the remote worker
population, the pivots within the remote worker population have limited the definition of remote workers to those who had positions well-suited to work remotely. Post-pandemic remote workers did not choose this style of work flexibility, may not have positions suited for this type of work, may not have work environments conducive to productivity, and may not be technically savvy. The post-pandemic remote workforce better reflects the actual, traditional workforce, in that some people fit their roles and others do not. Although similar themes may arise in literature, the remote worker population and internal crisis communication do not cross paths as of the date of this dissertation. Internal crisis communication research speaks to the general workforce, but the workforce has changed and changed again, which prioritizes the need to bridge the gap. Therefore, a bridge is needed to cross the significant gap that exists between internal crisis communication and the remote worker population.

**The Bridge: Zones of Engagement**

Given the characteristics and traits of the remote worker population, there are two components needed to close the gap between internal crisis communication and the remote worker population. First, organizations need to prioritize employee engagement during the entire crisis lifecycle. Second, this work will propose an adapted framework for employee engagement during the different stages of crisis. The prioritization of employee engagement in the context of crisis will close the gap between internal crisis communication and the remote worker population.

Employee engagement will serve as the bridge to close the gap, and Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement framework will be used to unite communication strategies with remote worker populations in crisis successfully. As previously mentioned, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study intended to uncover connections on how employees
experienced engagement through the lens of internal communication responsibility (p. 142).

Although emotion had been considered in terms of crisis, many of the frameworks and models
do not speak directly to the employee, much less the remote worker. For example, Jin et al.
measured four emotions (anger, fright, anxiety, and sadness), based on the type of crisis event,
organizational engagement, and coping strategies. In this case, organizational engagement was
declared as “the extent to which crisis-bearing organizations devote resources and energy to
dealing with crises” (Lu & Huang, 2018, p. 99). Jin et al. (2007, 2012) measured how a public’s
perception of organizational engagement and their associated coping strategy shaped their
emotional response to various crises (p. 99). Although other scholars, Lu and Huang (2018),
going on to further these studies, the idea still offered insight, but no concrete connection led
directly to the topic of crisis communication with remote employees.

Zones of Engagement, on the other hand, speaks to employee engagement but does not
specifically address crisis communication or remote workers. Having established that employee
engagement was key to filling the gap, a robust employee engagement framework is needed to
anchor organizational efforts before, during, and after crisis. But first, the Zones of Engagement
need to be redefined for remote worker populations. Since Zones of Engagement embraced the
shift of employees to the central role within employee engagement research, this approach
speaks directly to the perceived uniquity of remote workers. The Zones of Engagement model’s
intent was to “reveal how meaning is created through the process of engagement” (Lemon &
Palenchar, 2018, p. 3). Though Lemon and Palenchar (2018) define zones, they are not intended
to be static, but rather multi-layered and moving components of ongoing engagement
experiences.
Zones of Engagement consists of 6 overlapping zones: employee engagement is 1) non-work-related experiences, 2) freedom in the workplace, 3) going above and beyond roles and responsibilities, 4) when work is a vocational calling, 5) is about creating value, and 6) when connections are built (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 3). First, this dissertation will re-examine Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) definitions of each Zone of Engagement based on the remote worker population.

**Figure 5**

*Lemon and Palenchar’s Zones of Engagement*


As seen in Figure 5, the model presents an overlapping and fluid depiction of six components, which will be defined per the original framework.

1) **Non-work-related experiences.**

According to Lemon and Palenchar (2018), employee engagement is found in non-work-related experiences, such as “as support during tough times, sending out holiday cards,
leadership support, finding common points of interest with leadership and community service” (p. 148). When employees were surveyed in Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study, they connected these types of experiences as engagement. Others surveyed reminisced about the support they received when family members passed away or personal tours of the city when they transferred in for work. Examples like these “demonstrate that part of the employee experience is being treated as a human, not a worker or asset, and this helps lead to employee engagement” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 148). Being fully present at work is not necessarily a promise between employees and organizations, but showing employees care, in a non-work-related way, can produce employee engagement (Kahn, 1992).

Research on remote workers presents very little that would either agree or disagree with the scholarship based on traditional workers. Although there is significant research about the consideration of an individual’s setup within the scope of remote work, this content would not be considered non-work since it is related to the work environment. However, work/life balance does figure into this component from the perspective of the remote worker. By prioritizing an employee’s family commitments, an employer is showing the employee that they care. In this component, it looks less like allowing an employee off early to make a child’s soccer game and more like knowing the family that exists behind the computer screen. Given the unique non-work environment present during COVID-19 (i.e., children home from school, spouse or roommates working from home, elderly parents), managers have an opportunity to acknowledge these challenges and support their employees, despite the impact on their productivity and work environment. While the acknowledgment of a death in the family might have resulted in engagement in a traditional sense, the acknowledgment of an employee’s child’s remote learning challenges could be just as impactful. According to Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020), it is
important for management to recognize that “employees are all individuals with different approaches and needs” and that flexibility was key to fulfilling employee needs (p.7). Consideration of work/life balance extends the definition of non-work-related experiences to include the remote worker population.

2) Freedom in the workplace

Although freedom in the workplace would appear to align instantly with the remote worker configuration, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) definition develops from a completely different perspective. According to the scholars, freedom was defined as the ability to “explore and experiment with projects or assignments related to their job responsibilities” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 148). The employees studied wanted freedom to be creative in their own job. Additionally, these employees needed trust, so when they experimented, they could fail without organizational repercussions. They needed space to be creative and make mistakes. Surveyed employees were trusted to accomplish their work and be successful in their jobs, which created employee engagement (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). The component of freedom begins to cross lines into the next component, as employees used their freedom to go above and beyond their job responsibilities. According to Lemon and Palenchar (2018), “freedom in the workplace provides employees the opportunity to take risks in decision-making and develop passion projects” (p. 148). Passion projects, which were predominantly outside of the scope of traditional job responsibilities, encouraged employees to put in the extra effort to make them happen.

In this zone, current research offers a direct connection to the remote worker population. In many remote worker studies or commentaries, scholars celebrate autonomy or self-efficacy as a means of engagement for this population. Although fully defined in the literature review, autonomy is the act of independence and freedom, whereas self-efficacy refers to one’s
perception that one can successfully complete a task. Both of these ideas, which are very present in remote worker literature, create a parallel to Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) definition of freedom in the workplace. As discussed in the literature review, Staples et al. (2006) suggested that “remote employees self-efficacy assessments play a critical role in influencing their remote work effectiveness, perceived productivity, job satisfaction, and ability to cope” (p. 758). This populations’ ability to work confidently in independence is not only crucial to their engagement but to their overall success. Often, the ability to tap co-worker assistance is unlikely in remote situations, so as isolation grows, employee autonomy has an opportunity to flourish. MacFarlane (2016) connected remote work with the term “knowledge worker” and suggested that due to the nature of remote work, employees shifted from management roles to quantifiable knowledge worker roles (p. 77). Knowledge workers, according to MacFarlane (2016), were tasked with outputting ideas rather than managing people. In order to excel in this work, employees needed to have a high level of skill and knowledge in their roles. It could be assumed that less skilled workers could flounder in the home environment without easy access to assistance. In short, working independently and believing they can accomplish the work was a direct ticket to freedom in the workplace. The challenge in both tradition and remote is how management intends to accomplish these goals.

3) Going above and beyond roles

Although employees chose to go above and beyond for their passion projects, this component demonstrates the presence of employee engagement when employees chose to go above and beyond in their roles as required by their job (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). When surveyed about employee engagement, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study found that meeting job requirements did not equal engagement. Instead, employees who accomplished more than
expected and proactively managed their position were considered engaged workers. From the perspective of Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) survey, employees who fulfilled the minimums of their job description were often considered disengaged. Disengagement is listed as a sub-category of going above and beyond in the Zones of Engagement because participating employees in the survey consistently defined “doing the bare minimum” as disengaged employees (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 149).

From the perspective of remote workers, going above and beyond absolutely served as a sign of engagement but also signaled a warning to management. Although present in the traditional workplace, over-engagement can be an easy misstep for remote workers. According to Robinson (2019), employees that are “always on,” from a technology standpoint, are more likely to experience burnout (para. 5). Sull et al. (2020) reported that employees felt like they needed to be available and present 24 hours a day, which muddled the lines between home life and work life. Since scholars agree that remote workers work more hours than traditional workers (Angelici & Profeta, 2020), it is imperative that organizations understand the cutoff between engagement and over-engagement. In evaluating Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) definition, it is important to consider the fine line between going above and beyond and tipping the scale to over-engagement.

4) **Work as a vocational calling**

According to Zones of Engagement, an engaged employee has a job that is their passion. Lemon and Palenchar (2018) argued that engagement was about “being engaged is not about punching a timecard and earning a living, but instead, it is the transition to seeing the job as more than just a job” (p. 149). Understanding the organizational mission and the employee’s role within that vision, in addition to having access to information, leads to employee engagement
(Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 149). One employee in Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study suggested that engaged employees view their positions as vocations, such as “You don’t do police work. You’re a police officer” (p. 149). The key in this component is that employees “take on the identity” of their job, and “this creates a reciprocal connection between the work identity and vocational calling” (p. 149). Work as a vocational calling can also be developed, offering employees pathways to pursue their passions through work.

In this zone, the definition of work as a vocation, in terms of remote workers, needs to be expanded. While Lemon and Palenchar (2018) capture the essence of vocational work in a traditional setting, the remote worker might be driven by the unique luxuries they are afforded. For those employees who struggle with the work/life balance, remote work can offer unexpected relief, which could drive a renewed sense of purpose at work. The employee might feel called to be at home, especially given the challenges of COVID-19. This might fulfill their vocational calling, which could offer a new perception of work. Given the significance placed on work/life fit and work/life balance throughout this discussion, there is value in repetition that “the ability to successfully integrate work and personal/family life” (i.e., work/life fit) drives vitality in the home, workplace, and the community (Hill et al., 2008a, p. 159). From the worker perspective, the success of the whole employee is central to the success of an organization, so the work/life fit is essential to the remote worker’s success. A revised definition that included vocationally driven work/life balance would broaden the scope of this zone for remote workers.

5) Creating value

Within the Zones of Engagement, creating value is defined as an organic experience that occurs when employees see their contribution to the organization’s efforts and, potentially, their impact on the wider community. Recognition for these efforts does not have to occur for the
event to trigger employee engagement for all people, but for some, the added reinforcement created an understanding that their work was “important, meaningful, and impactful” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 149). Most importantly, the employees in Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study found that spontaneous recognition was the most valuable and led to the most organic moments of employee engagement. Additionally, in the study, some employees wanted to continue this impact outside the walls of their organization and found engagement as they improved the community in which they lived and worked (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018).

One of the keys from Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) definition was spontaneous and solicited recognition. From the perspective of remote workers, one of the underlying issues was a general distrust of and in remote working. Before recognition could be offered, a general recognition of a remote employee’s value must be established. Prior to the pandemic, a select population participated in remote work in some organizations leaving many traditional employees, including managers, somewhat skeptical that remote workers were as productive or as available, as traditional workers (Voydanoff, 2007). Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) referred to this issue as organizational commitment and suggested that, based on their study, that some flexible work arrangements had failed because mid-management did not embrace the leadership’s policy for remote workers (p. 11). According to Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020), a culture transformation was needed to implement and support the policy fully. In order to do this, the policy needed to be modeled by leadership, not just installed (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Additionally, Hammer et al. (2005) reported that remote work situations could have negative effects on employees, including career-limiting penalties. Without support or recognition of this population, then any off-handed, albeit sincere, recognition might be comprised. However, the pivot from select populations to entire populations for remote workers has likely, at least in the
short-term, leveled the playing field between remote and traditional workers (Patterson, 2019). With general recognition of the remote worker's position temporarily resolved, it would be reasonable to expect that both traditional and remote workers need spontaneous recognition to assist in creating value in either remote or traditional settings. Therefore, the definition would be consistent, given the pandemic, in both scenarios.

6) Building connections

According to Lemon and Palenchar (2018), connections “enabled or created a bridge to employee engagement experiences” (p. 150). Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) participants made connections in three areas: organizationally (i.e., through mission and vision), in the job role, and with other employees. The drivers behind these connections were important as well, and while some participants wanted personal, emotional connection (i.e., teamwork, friendships), other participants wanted a “close connection to the company and the work” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 150). According to a participant in Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study, “They want to be a part of teams today. People want to work together” (p. 150). Other participants in the study drew their personal connection directly from leadership. The study suggested that there was a direct tie between engaged management and engaged employees (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018).

This is an area that aligns well between traditional and remote workers. Although this zone is important for traditional workers, it is monumental for remote workers, given the obvious barriers in communication. In fact, a key driver of remote work success is strong communication between the management and the individual employee (Donaldson, 1990; Stanton & Buskirk, 1987; Staples, 1996; Staples et al., 2006). Yet, Nancherla (2010) reported that approximately 81% of remote workers surveyed found building relationships and connections difficult in remote work. Smith et al. (2018) offered solutions for disconnection, suggesting the use of
multiple communication channels helped to make employees “feel more connected to the organization,” which again increased job satisfaction at home (p. 62). Conversely, when employees do not feel connection and support in their roles as remote workers by management, they often abandon (i.e., seek traditional work) their roles (Kwon et al., 2019). According to Kwon et al. (2019), management has a responsibility to support their employees, both in work/life balance and in remote work challenges, in order to build solid and lasting connections. Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) agreed and reported that their study found that remote workers’ success was “highly dependent on line managers successfully managing the [remote work] policy….the onus was on the managers to make FWAs a success”(p. 14). The study further suggested that without the combination of a strong management/employee relationship and a “psychological contract” between management and employees, the remote work effort would inevitably fail (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020, p. 14). In order to achieve engagement and satisfaction in remote workers, building relationships and connections between management and employees are key.
**Figure 6**

*Zones of Engagement Redefined for Remote Workers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement is…</th>
<th>Remote Worker Populations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-work-related</td>
<td>Expand Definition to include work/life balance connection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td>Definition Aligns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom in the</td>
<td>Definition Aligns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>Definition Aligns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going Above and</td>
<td>Definition Aligns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Roles</td>
<td>Definition Aligns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work as a Vocational</td>
<td>Expand Definition, given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calling</td>
<td>vocational elements that may be fulfilled by working from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Value</td>
<td>Definition Aligns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building connections</td>
<td>Definition Aligns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. From Public relations and zones of engagement: Employees’ lived experiences and the fundamental nature of employee engagement, by Lemon & Palenchar, 2018.

(doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.01.002)

After a thorough study of the components of the Zones of Engagement, most zones could be connected with the known traits and needs of remote workers. Like the Zones of Engagement, there are different dimensions and complexities of remote workers that exist alone or all at the same time. As Burke (1969) suggested, unique individuals, make up groups, as opposed to viewing a group made of individuals. These individualistic members of the remote worker population may each be functioning in a different Zone of Engagement, or in multiple Zones of Engagement, in addition to operating in a unique home setting.
With the Zones of Engagement aligned and redefined for the remote worker population, the next jump will connect employee engagement to internal crisis communication. In a 2014 study, Saji argued that not only was the corporate world experiencing a crisis in employee engagement but in employee engagement as it relates to crisis management. Again, while Saji’s (2014) study connects employee engagement and internal crisis communication, it does not consider the remote worker population. With this in mind, Saji (2014) explored the value of employee engagement in crisis management and asserted that during crisis, engagement is integral to a successful crisis resolution. Saji (2014) argued that employee engagement opportunities started “from the point of hiring to treating them with trust and respect throughout their journey with the organization” (p.114). This journey, as many organizations discover, can often be interrupted by crisis. Using his employee engagement model for crisis situations, Saji (2014) found that engaged employees, who fulfilled Kahn’s (1990) requirements for personal engagement (i.e., meaningfulness, availability, and safety), displayed discretionary behaviors during crisis.

From a practical perspective, it is important to illustrate how discretionary behaviors impact an organizational crisis. In the 2014 case study, there was a terrorist attack on a hotel in Mumbai, India, and the reactions of employees were documented from the perspective of employee engagement. Since the hotel team functioned pre-crisis in high employee engagement, employees were able to act autonomously during the crisis to guard and protect the guests (Saji, 2014). According to the study, the guests of the hotel “were overwhelmed by the employees’ dedication to duty and commitment” (Saji, 2014, p.113). The hotel valued improvisation over hard and fast rules and promoted guest satisfaction over company satisfaction. That culture, which aligned well with components of Zones of Engagement (i.e., going above and beyond,
freedom in the workplace), paved the way for a successful crisis. If terrorist attacks are one extreme, then the opposite extreme might look like small talk between a community bank teller and a customer after rumors of a potential big bank merger swirled around the community. The small talk or encouraging word from that teller might make the difference in a key account within the financial institution. The impact of discretionary and autonomous behavior is invaluable in a crisis situation, yet few frameworks consider both topics. Employee engagement is a key component of a successful crisis outcome and must be integrated into strategic preparedness.

**Figure 7**

*Employee Engagement Model for Crisis Situations*

![Employee Engagement Model for Crisis Situations](https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/EJBM/article/view/13730/13894)

Saji (2014) illustrated his ideas in an employee engagement model for crisis, which is one of the only frameworks available that bridges that gap between crisis and remote populations. Reading Figure 7 left from right, Saji (2014) first documented the antecedents to employee engagement, which contain many of the same components of the Zones of Engagement. The antecedents created “empowered and committed employees” that reflected Kahn’s psychological conditions for employee engagement (Saji, 2014, p. 114). These employees, according to Saji’s (2014) model, were then able to produce discretionary behaviors during crisis, which provided a more successful crisis outcome.

Although titled and described somewhat differently, Saji’s (2014) antecedents nearly mirror the elements of the Zones. For example, Saji (2014) called for training for self-efficacy and role empowerment, while Lemon and Palenchar (2018) created freedom in the workplace zone, which produced self-efficacy and role empowerment. Each of Saji’s (2014) antecedents are present in the Zones of Engagement, which suggests that the Zones are an excellent conduit to develop internal crisis communication strategy. In Figure 8, a comparison of Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement and Saji’s (2014) Employee Engagement Model for Crisis Situations displays the congruence between the two frameworks.
**Figure 8**

*Comparison of Zones and Employee Engagement Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saji’s Employee Engagement Model Antecedents</th>
<th>Applicable Zone of Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Community and employee development values of the organization.</td>
<td>Creating Value/Vocational Calling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Employee and organization value congruence at time of selection.</td>
<td>Building Connections (Mission)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Creating supportive and trustful management culture.</td>
<td>Building Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rewards and recognition from immediate managers and innovative reward schemes.</td>
<td>Creating Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Training for self-efficacy and role empowerment</td>
<td>Freedom in the Workplace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


With the connections made by Saji (2014) between employee engagement and discretionary behavior during crisis, there is still the lack of a current framework that combines remote workers, employee engagement, and crisis communication. Saji’s (2014) framework mirrors many of the sentiments of the Zones of Engagement but predicts behavior in a crisis instead of pointing to communication strategies. Additionally, the framework, in no way, speaks to the remote worker population. Given the established gap, the Zones of Engagement still serves as the most current framework, based in the strategic communication tradition, that connects and addresses employee engagement, especially with the broadened definitions that this
work has recommended. With an adapted Zones of Engagement for remote populations, the only missing component to bridge the gap would be a pathway to internal crisis communication. If the Zones of Engagement could be realigned for strategic purposes in internal crisis communication strategy, then the bridge could be tested in future studies and would cease to exist.

In Lemon’s (2019a) subsequent study of the Zones of Engagement, she tested the Zones of Engagement in a government contractor setting, which slightly altered the positioning of the zones and their implications. For example, in Figure 9, the work as a vocation zone and freedom in the workplace are shown independent of the framework since they are either already fulfilled or not applicable (Lemon, 2019a). According to Lemon (2019a), the work as a vocation zone was removed from the framework because, in contractor work, the study found that “the nature of the work lends itself to already fulfilling the zone of work as a vocation” (p. 6). In other words, the core of the job was protecting national security, which fulfilled a vocational need for those employees. Freedom in the workplace was not applicable to this model since in government contracting, safety and regulations are key, and innovation and creative freedom are overwhelmingly discouraged (Lemon, 2019a, p. 8). Although freedom in the workplace is a relevant zone, it is outside of the model because it cannot be used to drive engagement within this population. Lemon (2019a) commented that the removed zones still remained outside of the framework “in the event a shift in experiences occurs over time” (p. 9).

In addition to removing zones from the central framework, other modifications were made to fully represent the government contractor population. For example, the creating value zone needed improvement and was presented with a dotted line. According to Lemon’s (201b9) study, employees had challenging work and were able to see the fruit of their efforts on a
national level, but not on a local, organizational level. Lemon (2019a) argued that although creating value might be more difficult to achieve given the environment, that nonetheless, employees needed the zone to create more advanced levels of employee engagement. The building connections zone had two components, colleagues and mission, given their relevance to this population (Lemon, 2019a). Finally, discretionary effort is shaded and has a black spot on the zone to represent the “dark side,” which Lemon (2019a) characterized as “the result of long-term discretionary effort” (p. 8). Lemon’s (2019a) study found that management was conducting employee engagement activities merely to check the box and not to organically evolve a culture, which was counter-productive to engagement efforts (p. 8). In conclusion, Lemon (2019a) visually adapted the Zones of Engagement to more accurately represent the government contractor population. The Zones of Engagement could be adapted and eventually tested for other populations, such as remote workers or remote workers in the crisis lifecycle.

**Figure 9**

*Zones of Engagement for Government Contractor Employees*
Given the malleability of Zones of Engagement, as observed in the 2019 government contractor study, the framework could again be modified to speak to populations in crisis specifically. While a crisis is likely not the best time to start employee engagement efforts, it should not be assumed that it is too late to implement employee engagement efforts into internal crisis communication. The Zones of Engagement framework is still functioning, even in crisis. There is potential that a crisis could actually kickstart moments of employee engagement as specific circumstances change an employee’s role, responsibilities, and view of the organization. The content delivered in crises could lead to an entire wave of employee engagement, right when an organization might need it the most.

**Where Do We Go from Here?**

Considering the role of employee engagement during crisis, there is an immediate need, given the state of the workplace, to adapt an engagement framework and apply it to crisis with an audience of remote workers. Pause for a moment and remember emergency room technician Marsha Hedgepeth, who swam 200 yards in murky, debris-filled water to walk through the doors of her hospital to deliver care to others. There is value in engagement during crisis. Remember Jill, who was ready to walk out the door to fulfill her dreams (i.e., personal crisis), but someone acknowledged her value and disconnected it from her physical location. There is value to engagement during crisis. The post-pandemic workplace has a specific, unique, and new stakeholder audience that is in crisis (i.e., pandemic). This audience will be part of the next
normal participating in today’s workforce. If powered with employee engagement, this stakeholder would not only be prepared for a future crisis but could evolve into a happier, more productive employee within a traditional or remote workforce. In the next chapter, a modified framework will be proposed, based on Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement, to better align with the stages of crisis, so employee engagement is always a key, strategic focus.
Chapter 4: A Modified Framework

In the last Chapter, a clear solution was presented to close the gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population using Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement. With this framework identified, this interpretive discussion evaluated the definitions within each zone to ensure that they were inclusive of the remote worker population. With definitions updated, the next step is to modify the newly defined zones to align with Coombs’ (2015a) crisis lifecycle. Since remote worker needs and goals are now integrated into the zones, it will be critical to connect the framework to crisis to ensure that gap can be fully bridged by this framework.

In this section, this interpretive discussion will reexamine Coombs’ crisis lifecycle to specifically identify the components that allow employees to experience engagement. Then the redefined Zones of Engagement will be aligned with the crisis lifecycle components in order to evaluate the zones by each stage of crisis (i.e., pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis). This analysis will produce a framework that provides insight into both the remote worker population and effective communication strategies for employees throughout the crisis lifecycle. Like the others, this chapter begins with a story. A #vanlifer named Tim advocated for a reset – one that showcased his commitment and engagement.

Where Do We Begin?

In October 2016, Tim and Louie fired up their camper van and hit the road. Although it took some convincing, Tim was allowed to trade his Denver cubicle at Cisco Headquarters for teleworking in a slightly rusty 2014 Nissan NV2500 with his photogenic golden retriever Louie. He longed to “create a better quality of life” and wanted to roam the back roads while still staying engaged with his company (Lutz, 2021, para. 2). This new quality of life would boost the
bottom line, he promised. His actual role did not necessarily inspire him, but the organization offered opportunities and benefits that allowed him to pursue his perceived purpose while still benefiting their organization and clients (Lutz, 2021). “It’s not something you dream of doing when you’re a kid, but if you’re an adult and need adventure like you need oxygen, then this account (i.e., Instagram) proves it’s what you make of it” (Lutz, 2021, para. 3). Today, he still works successfully in software maintenance at Cisco, and it is safe to say, at least based on his Instagram (i.e., @vantravelogue), that Louie is living his best life. When Tim hit the road in 2016, this idea of remote work still seemed counter-culture, but today, remote work is no longer a dream. Tim spent nine months convincing his employer, but today we are asking how we can convince Tim to stay. He is loyal, creative, entrepreneurial, and he places a priority on his work, calling it “protecting his castle” (Lutz, 2021, para. 3). He wants to work at Cisco, and he wants to live on the road. Tim fought for this opportunity, but with the pivot of the pandemic and his subsequent success on Instagram, Tim is much more marketable. Organizations must act quickly to retain remote employees through consistent and strategic employee engagement through all stages of the crisis lifecycle.

Setting the Stage for Modification

During each stage of crisis (i.e., pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis), scholars have identified stakeholder behaviors and management solutions to, at best, defuse a crisis or, at worst, lessen the collateral damage. In this chapter, each crisis stage will be analyzed to highlight the communication goals associated with that particular segment in order to fully understand how the organization should function during these periods and how an optimal crisis communication plan should operate. In other words, what should the organization be doing during each phase? Scholars have covered this topic at length, but this project will ultimately use the established
crisis stages to modify Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement to speak directly to the remote worker population.

Stages of Crisis Lifecycle

When examining the stages of crisis, one of the most important, overarching factors to consider is that crisis is a lifecycle. Each stage of crisis has different characteristics and, therefore, should be managed uniquely. Coombs (2015a) referred to this as “staged approaches,” which divided the crisis into “discrete segments …executed in a specific order” (p. 6). Given that the lifecycle is ongoing, there is a clear connection to the reality that crisis communication and organizational communication should both be happening at the same time, all the time. By understanding the stages of crisis and the opportunities to communicate within each one, organizations can better manage crisis with their organizations. In this application, the characteristics of each stage of crisis will be used to connect stage-specific communication needs with opportunities for engagement.

As previously referenced, there are several relevant approaches to categorizing crisis. According to Coombs (2015a), the three-stage approach (i.e., pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis) offered the most simplified yet most comprehensive view of the crisis lifecycle. Other approaches, namely from Fink (1986) and Mitroff (1994), were more elaborate but could be reduced to fit into the more general, three-stage model. While the three-stage approach did not have a clear author, it was widely publicized and accepted by a number of different scholars (i.e., Birch, 1994; Guth, 1995; Mitchell, 1986; Seeger et al., 2003), who utilized the framework to direct crisis management efforts (Coombs, 2015a). Given the support and history behind this framework, this dissertation will utilize the three-stage model and Coombs’ (2015a) prescriptive crisis management and communication guidelines as a framework for planning and tracking the
different stages of crisis. With the three-stage model in hand, the stages will be analyzed to
determine the environment, parameters, and initiatives within each segment.

**Pre-Crisis**

The first stage of the three-stage crisis lifecycle is arguably the most complex. The pre-
crisis stage includes everything that happens before the crisis trigger event (Coombs, 2015a).
Engler (2020) defined crisis trigger events as “… times in history when sudden events — natural
disasters, economic collapses, pandemics, wars, famines — change everything. They change
politics, they change economics, and they change public opinion in drastic ways” (para. 2).
Recent trigger events include 9/11, the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, and the financial depression
of 2008 (Engler, 2020). Specific triggers can be debatable, but most agree that the onset of the
COVID-19 pandemic was a trigger for months, and potentially years, of economic and social
unrest. The pre-crisis segment ends when the crisis trigger event begins. According to several
scholars (Coombs, 2015a; Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 1994), management and communication efforts in
the pre-crisis segment should include detection, prevention, and preparation. The overarching
goal of the pre-crisis stage is to prevent the crisis from ever happening.

**Detection.** During the normal business day, pre-crisis detection should be an ongoing
item on the agenda. Management should analyze both the external and internal environment in
search of warning signals (Coombs, 2015a). From the perspective of detection, Coombs (2015a)
suggested there were three main areas within an organization that should be prioritized to detect
crisis: issues management, reputation management, and risk management (p. 31). According to
Heath (1990), issues management is a process that both identifies the problem and develops an
action plan to resolve it. Most important to this discussion, issues management is often focused
on the external environment (Coombs, 2015a; Heath 2006). This dissertation is focused on the
internal stakeholder, but internal populations are often affected by an external issue. Issues management can attempt to assert an organization’s position, or the organization itself can be altered to respond to the issue (Coombs, 2015a, p. 32). In the end, the goal is a resolution before a crisis fully appears. However, some crises are unforeseen and unavoidable. Although organizations can certainly create crisis management plans to prepare themselves in these situations, it is important to note that a crisis can create an issue (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). If a hurricane is mishandled from a crisis management perspective, issues could arise within an organization. Detection of issues and the management and analysis of those findings are key components of pre-crisis management. With communication in mind, the key during detection is listening to the internal and external environment to identify the brewing crisis.

While issues management wants to shape a resolution, reputation management intends to sway how stakeholders view the organization. As previously stated, a stakeholder is “any group that can affect or be affected by the behavior of an organization” (Bryson, 1995, para.1). A positive reputation is an outcome of a positive stakeholder relationship (Coombs, 2004a, 2015a). The reputation management process, like the larger lifecycle, is ongoing, incorporating history with current efforts. Indirect impacts (i.e., secondhand knowledge that leads to an opinion) and direct impacts (i.e., firsthand stakeholder interactions that influence opinion) both contribute to Coombs’ (2004b, 2015a) suggestion that “a threat to the relationship is a threat to the reputation” (p. 35). Similarly, neither primary stakeholders (i.e., employees, investors, customers) nor secondary stakeholders (i.e., media, competitors) can be ignored from the perspective of reputation management. The ultimate goal within reputation management is to keep the balance on reputation as positive as possible. Scanning for potential reputational pitfalls, both internally and externally, offers a safety net if and when the company succumbs to crisis.
Finally, risk management rounds out detection efforts by focusing on the internal risks within an organization (Coombs, 2015a). Issues are primarily external, whereas risks originate from the inside, and they are everywhere. Coombs (2015a) suggested that when managers practiced risk-averse behavior, that it translated to crisis prevention (p. 39). Risk assessments and action plans offer risk reduction opportunities, which range from containment of hazardous materials to training on email use. Risk management also includes risk communication, which is a volley between an organization that identifies the risk and stakeholders who perceive the risk (Coombs, 2015a). Issues management, reputation management, and risk management are all proactive management opportunities to detect a crisis in an attempt to diffuse it.

**Prevention.** Within the pre-crisis timeline, a potential crisis is first detected through issues management, reputation management, and risk management. Then, the management team is charged with prevention. According to Coombs (2015a), there are five steps in the crisis prevention process: (1) identify information, (2) collect information, (3) analyze information, (4) take “preventative action if warranted,” and (5) measure the effectiveness of the effort (p.44). In the first step of identification, management seeks red flags and scans the organizational environment using surveys, trade journals, media reports, and individuals (Coombs, 2015a). Heath and Nelson (1986) point to stakeholders as key contributors to crisis prevention. Coombs (2015a) said, “It is easy to become overly dependent on the mass media and forget about people as resources for environment information” (p. 46). Once the information is identified, collection and analysis become the next two objectives. Customer complaints on social media are an excellent example of the importance of information collection. By categorizing and coding specific complaints, trends can be seen from the feedback. However, if all of the feedback is dumped into a file folder, fewer insights can be pulled from the data. Coombs (2015a) suggested
interviewing (i.e., face-to-face interviews, surveys, focus groups) key stakeholder groups during the information collection process in order to identify and prevent crises. Since data without analysis yields few results, this third step (i.e., analysis) explores the likelihood and impact of each potential threat (Coombs, 2015a, p. 54). First, crisis managers score how likely it is that the collected threat will become a crisis, and second, they calculate the potential impact of the event. This score provides critical information to management teams who must determine their next course of action. These first three steps in crisis-sensing transfer information to knowledge and are the initial efforts in pre-crisis prevention.

The fourth step to crisis prevention involves the decision to take action or ignore and monitor the threat. If action is necessary, then efforts are made to “eliminate or reduce the likelihood of a warning sign becoming a crisis” (Coombs, 2015a, p. 61). Once a crisis red flag is removed, then the focus transitions to the fifth step of crisis prevention: evaluation. Jones and Chase (1979) measured pre-crisis preventative success by analyzing the actual outcome with the intended outcome. Closing expectation gaps (i.e., gaps between what stakeholders believed needed to happen and what did happen) can contribute to “co-created meaning,” or suggests that organizations and stakeholders “share a similar interpretation of the organization’s performance on the desired expectations” (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Coombs, 2015a, p. 63). Coombs (2015a) suggested that a paracrisis (i.e., when a crisis threat, as opposed to an actual crisis, is handled publicly) can often mirror an actual crisis response. Paine (2011) summarized prevention perfectly, “The single best way to avoid a crisis is to listen carefully to your audiences and respond to threats before they get out of hand” (p. 165). This constant evaluation of data to inform crisis threats and prevention should be an ongoing effort for organizations.
Preparation. Continuing to follow Coombs’ (2015a) framework for crisis management, the last major component of the pre-crisis stage is preparation. Ideally, all crises could be avoided, but if a crisis appears to be inevitable, the best approach is to acknowledge it and prepare. Coombs (2015a) identified a six-phase approach to preparation: “(1) diagnosing vulnerabilities, (2) assessing crisis types, (3) selecting and training a crisis management team, (4) selecting and training a spokesperson, (5) developing a crisis management plan (i.e., CMP), and (6) reviewing the crisis communication system” (p. 66). Every organization is unique, and therefore they have different types of vulnerabilities to mitigate (Fink, 1986). Coombs (2015a) suggested that “different crises necessitate the use of different crisis team members, emphasize different stakeholders, and warrant different crisis response strategies (p. 67). Organizations need to consider these components when preparing their unique strategy, which includes training stakeholders and crisis teams on how to operate to optimize the CMP. According to Coombs (2015a), one of the key attributes of a successful plan includes the ability of team members to improvise. Reiterating that each organization and crisis is unique, it is important to note that employees can be trained generally but must be empowered to improvise as needed. The CMP is critical, but not more so than the team member. In order to fully prepare stakeholders for crisis, they need to know “what they should do (i.e., task knowledge), feel they can do (i.e., self-efficacy), and are given a reason to act (i.e., motivation)” (Coombs, 2015a, p. 107). As discussed earlier, in a different context, cultural challenges limit the skillsets and efficacy of stakeholders (Heath et al., 2009), which challenge crisis communicators to find culturally specific methods of stakeholder preparation. Preparation is crucial when the crisis is imminent, but without the right crisis team members, most plans will fall flat.
Crisis

The second stage of the three-stage lifecycle begins with the trigger event and concludes when the crisis is resolved (Coombs, 2015a). According to Coombs (2015), “a situation becomes a crisis when key stakeholders agree it is a crisis” (p. 109). Considering that all preparation has led up to this, it is interesting that there is not truly a clear-cut start, or even end, to the crisis stage. Using the pandemic as an example, the worldwide crisis trigger could be pinpointed to Wuhan in late December 2019, yet panic had already set it before a real crisis was identified. The beginning is subjective, and the end of the crisis stage is tagged with resolution. But what one considers resolution might be only partially resolved to another. The goal of the crisis stage, in terms of communication, is recognition and containment (Coombs, 2015a; Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 1994).

Recognition. Recognition is the charge of the crisis team to convince others that they are in crisis. Using credibility, emotion, and reason (Coombs, 2015a; Larson, 1989; Tan, 1985), crisis teams provide factual and trustworthy information that helps organizations resist the urge to overlook a crisis. While a hurricane might not need or require much recognition, an issue brewing amongst customers could appear harmless. Since stakeholder groups might not be aware of the pending crisis, this idea of convincing organizations of crisis must happen quickly. Immediately, crisis teams must “determine what they need to know about the crisis, what they already know, and what they do not know” (Coombs, 2015a, p. 119). One deterrent from recognition amongst stakeholders is characterized as the MUM Effect (Coombs, 2015a). If derogatory information is released, stakeholders might rightfully fear repercussions. Similarly, stakeholders might alter information to make it appear less negative (Stohl & Redding, 1987). Once recognition is finally accomplished, the next step within crisis stage is containment.
**Containment.** The second major component of the crisis stage is to stop the spread of the crisis and limit its longevity. Nearly all crisis management guidance demands a quick response, but Smith and Hayne (1997) remind practitioners that speed can also increase risk (Coombs, 2015a). Although Coombs’ (2001) crisis strategy includes objectives and target markets like in any communication initiative, two major audiences surface: victims and nonvictims. If victims were directly impacted by the crisis, nonvictims could be divided into potential victims and voyeurs. Either the nonvictims could be potential victims, or the nonvictim is a voyeur who is an audience that is out of the realm of harm but wants to see how the organization will handle the crisis (Coombs, 2015a, p. 138). Target market distinctions are important because, at the end of the crisis stage, the victim group will be an entirely new stakeholder moving forward.

This stage of the crisis lifecycle is fast, unforgiving, and demands pre-mediation, which all, hopefully, was planned during the pre-crisis stage. As the crisis tide turns from a resolution of the initial crisis, post-crisis emerges to determine the next steps and the overall success of the organizational efforts.

**Post-Crisis**

The final stage in the lifecycle begins with the resolution of the crisis and ends when all post-crisis evaluations, training, and communications are complete (Coombs, 2015a). Since the cycle inevitably begins again, once the current crisis is resolved, an organization immediately begins planning for its next crisis. Although a stark reality, it is reality, nonetheless. The goal of the post-crisis stage is again preparation, but this time it is not for the current crisis, but for the next crisis. Additionally, the post-crisis stage attempts to ensure the crisis is complete and that a lasting, positive impression is present with the stakeholders (Coombs, 2015a). In most communication frameworks and cycles, the final steps include monitoring and measuring. The
post-crisis stage is designed to measure the impact of the event and learn from both successes and failures.

During crisis evaluation, Coombs (2015a) suggested that “all stakeholder groups involved in the crisis can be asked for feedback, including employees and external stakeholders” (p. 163). Just as these groups should have been tapped during pre-crisis efforts, they should again be surveyed and interviewed post-crisis. Coombs (2015a) even suggested hiring an outside firm to interview employees post-crisis. If, as Barton (1995) suggested, crisis management is designed to safeguard employees, reputation, and financial assets, then the opinions of stakeholders that offer this insight would be critical to post-crisis success. Since the post-crisis stage revolves around evaluation, then clearly, the goal is to learn from challenges or triumphs before the next crisis. With this in mind, organizational memory is a term used to promote documentation of what has happened and the process of storing it for retrieval later (Coombs, 2015a; Li et al., 2004; Weick, 1979). Although this seems to be a very technical idea about storage and retrieval, once real employees are visioned as the storage containers and part of the retrieval process, the idea becomes more critical to retention.

Having identified the characteristics and desired outcomes of each crisis stage, the next chapter will connect these outcomes with opportunities for engagement. Delivering crisis management communication through engagement techniques will both retain the employee and equip them during crises.

Crisis Lifecycle Summary Points

While Coombs’ (2015a) crisis lifecycle could be summarized in a number of ways, there are specific points of relevance to this discussion. In the table below, those summary points will
be highlighted as this discussion transitions into a connection between crisis stage and zone of engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Summary Points of Relevance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Pre-Crisis** | • Within detection, issues management and reputation management normally focus on the external environment, whereas risk management scans internally (Coombs, 2015a).  
• A positive reputation is an outcome of a positive stakeholder relationship (Coombs, 2015a).  
• No stakeholder can be ignored in terms of reputation (Coombs, 2015a, p. 35).  
• Employees (i.e., stakeholders) are key contributors to crisis prevention (Heath & Nelson, 1986).  
• Interviews (i.e., surveys, focus groups, face-to-face conversations) are powerful tools in collecting information for crisis analysis (Coombs, 2015a, p. 53).  
• Success in closing expectation gaps can create meaning for stakeholders (Coombs, 2015a, p. 63).  
• Listening to organizational audiences is a major key to avoiding crisis (Paine, 2011, p. 165).  
• The ability to improvise, in addition to basic crisis training, is crucial to a successful crisis plan (Coombs, 2015a, p. 78)  
• Prepared and skilled crisis team members are even more valuable than the CMP (Coombs, 2015a, p. 99). |
| **Crisis** | • Vague start and finish to the crisis segment (Coombs, 2015a).  
• Stakeholder uncertainty = stakeholder anxiety (Coombs, 2015a, p. 113).  
• Crisis teams often have to convince organizations that they are, in fact, in crisis (Coombs, 2015a, p. 114). |
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| Post-Crisis | • The MUM Effect illustrates fear over releasing negative information for fear of repercussions (Coombs, 2015a; Stohl & Redding, 1987).
| Post-Crisis | • Ask all stakeholders for feedback (Coombs, 2015a, p. 163).
| Post-Crisis | • Organizational memory, or storage and retrieval, takes place in stakeholders (Coombs, 2015a, p. 170). |

A Modified Framework

With a more concrete understanding of the stages of crisis, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement can now be strategically aligned with the stages to modify the original framework for engagement to use as a unique tool for crisis communication with remote worker populations. This chapter will identify the Zones needed for each stage of crisis to optimize the opportunities for engagement and crisis management.

Zone by Zone Analysis

Given that each crisis stage and Zone have previously been defined, this section will reiterate points of connection. Each Zone will be considered using context from the crisis lifecycle, beginning with the pre-crisis stage. Lemon and Palenchar (2018) present the six zones as areas where stakeholders, in this case, employees, perceive meaning through engagement. If these zones represent opportunities for engagement, then the task of this section is to match the objectives of the pre-crisis stage, described by Coombs (2015a), with the applicable zones, specifically for the remote worker population. While all zones could create engagement, specific zones could be more impactful within the three crisis stages. It is important to acknowledge that the pre-crisis stage is likely the longest and most dense, so, hypothetically, all of the Zones should have a presence in this stage. However, considering the focus of this effort is effective
crisis communication to remote worker populations, some Zones will likely play a larger role than others.

Since this adapted model will be conceptual and theoretical, the visual presentation of each circular Zone will be sized according to a rubric. Given the goals of this discussion, the rubric includes all three elements necessary in formulating more effective crisis communication, through engagement, to the remote worker population. Since engagement is already established as a component of each zone (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), the two components that should be validated in each zone are stage-specific crisis management and remote worker satisfaction.

First, two questions will be asked and answered for each Zone:

1) Does crisis management scholarship suggest and validate, through research, a need for the qualities exhibited in this Zone?

2) Does remote worker scholarship suggest and validate, through research, a need for specific qualities exhibited within this Zone? In other words, does this Zone apply to the needs of the remote worker?

Second, with the questions answered, a rubric will be used to assign a size to each of the Zones within each crisis stage. The rubric below illustrates this idea.

### Rubric for Size of Circular Zones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verified Research</th>
<th>Visual Size of Zone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In one area</td>
<td>Small Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In two areas</td>
<td>Medium Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In three areas</td>
<td>Large Circle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Illustration of Circular Zones**

![Illustration of Circular Zones](image)
The three areas of research measured in this rubric are employee engagement, remote workers, and the three stages of crisis management. For example, if available research advocated for the presence of the attributes of a particular Zone within a specific stage of crisis, then the Zone would be medium-sized. In other words, two areas would be verified by research (i.e., engagement and crisis management). If, in addition to that research, there was also scholarship to validate the need for the attributes of that Zone within the remote worker population, then the circle would be large. It is important to note that Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study validated, through research, the link between engagement and each Zone so that all Zones will be present. Said differently, each Zone will at least be represented as a small circle (i.e., for engagement). In the zone-by-zone analysis shown below, each section will conclude with a summary that will reveal the size of the Zone in that particular stage of crisis.

**Pre-Crisis.** Beginning with the pre-crisis stage, this section will connect crisis management activities, and remote worker needs to specific attributes produced in Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones. This discussion will be organized by crisis stage, then by Zone, and then broken down first by crisis management activities and second by remote worker needs.

**Summary of Stage-Specific Crisis-Communication Initiatives: Pre-Crisis**

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• Interviews (i.e., surveys, focus groups, face-to-face conversations) are powerful tools in collecting information for crisis analysis (Coombs, 2015a, p. 53).
• Success in closing expectation gaps can create meaning for stakeholders (Coombs, 2015a, p. 63).
• Listening to organizational audiences is a major key to avoiding crisis (Paine, 2011, p. 165).
• The ability to improvise, in addition to basic crisis training, is crucial to a successful crisis plan (Coombs, 2015a, p. 78)
• Prepared and skilled crisis team members are even more valuable than the CMP (Coombs, 2015a, p. 99).

### Zone 1: Non-work-related Experiences at Work.

This zone reflected moments when employees were “treated as a human, not a worker or asset” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). Since the pre-crisis stage contains everything leading up to the trigger event, the majority of employees within this stage are likely not aware of crisis threats until they are imminent. These opportunities for engagement are not contingent on crisis and often come in the form of a sympathy card from a manager or a congratulations during a morning meeting for a child’s award at school. This Zone normalizes the non-work side of the employee.

From scholarship in pre-crisis management, Coombs (2015a) said employees (i.e., stakeholders) who were part of a positive relationship with their manager contributed to a positive reputation for the organization (Coombs, 2015a). As previously established, a strong reputation can not only steer an organization out of a potential crisis but contributed to “attracting customers, generating investment interest, attracting top employee talent, motivating
workers, increasing job satisfaction, generating more positive media coverage, and garnering positive comments from financial analysts” (Alsop, 2004; Coombs, 2015a, p. 12; Davies et al., 2003; Dowling, 2002; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004; Kim & Yang, 2013; Van Riel, 2013). Given the value placed on reputation, a positive relationship with the employee stakeholder is critical. Most important to crisis management, Tyler (2020) suggested that employees were far more likely to share their insights when in a trusting relationship with their manager. With that in mind, Heath and Nelson (1986) argued that insight from employees was key to overall crisis prevention. Positive relationships create strong organizational reputations and open the gateways for information sharing in the pre-crisis. According to Lapierre et al. (2008), managers who created a family-supportive experience within the workplace lowered levels of work-family conflict within employees, which translated into “greater job and family satisfaction, followed by greater overall life satisfaction (p.1). Therefore, the non-work experience at work would certainly be a component of the employee/manager relationship, which is proven to be a positive indicator of employee trust and job satisfaction.

From the perspective of the remote worker, the non-work experience for the post-pandemic worker moved from a benefit to an essential need. Pre-pandemic employees were more engaged if their employer acknowledged their non-work life (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), but post-pandemic employees must have their non-work life acknowledged in order to be transparent about their work environment. According to Lobell (2020), a writer for Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Hub International employee Drisana Rios “alleged that the company fired her because she didn't keep her kids quiet while on business calls” (para. 2). Karen Roberts, a Human Resources director in Philadelphia, said, “The [employees’] concern is that it could happen to them, as well, [which causes] resentment of an increase in workload on
others due to the loss of a team member, and the perception that the company is not supportive of its employees” (Lobell, 2020, para. 9). Given the number of employees who were met with immediate distractions when businesses were shuttered for the pandemic, there are a number of post-pandemic remote workers who navigate difficult non-work situations on a daily basis. Shana Bartley, a leader with the National Women’s Law Center, pointed to women in the post-pandemic remote workforce and said, “This is the workforce behind the workforce. They power the economy” (Santhanam, 2020, para. 6). Although this discussion has focused on the parental challenge in connection with non-work, it should be expanded to consider the caregiver role in general. Employees care for parents, siblings, spouses, and even pets. The remote population exists in the non-work environment and the work environment simultaneously, so it seems ridiculous to attempt not to include these components in crisis efforts. Before the pandemic, non-work recognition was a nicety, but post-pandemic, the lack of non-work recognition is a pitfall.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, pre-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 1 (i.e., Non-work-related Experiences at Work), this Zone would be displayed as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Zone 2: Workplace Freedom.** This Zone is not about physical proximity from the traditional workplace, but rather a freedom to be creative, to take risks, and to go beyond the scope of their specific job function. In Lemon’s (2019a) study in which the validity of the Zones was tested for government contractor employees, she found that in government contracting, freedom in the workplace was not celebrated. However, organizations that allow employees to drive their decision-making and create a space for making mistakes certainly offered opportunities for engagement through workplace freedom.
From the perspective of pre-crisis management, scholars have made it clear that organizations need employees on crisis teams who can think outside the box. They need creativity and behavior that might feel risky but also might save the organization. Coombs (2015a) wrote extensively about the creation of pre-crisis teams and offered that the ability to “improvise” was critical to successful crisis management (p. 78). According to Tabesh and Vera (2020), “Improvisation is the conception of action, as it unfolds the fusion of planning and execution to drive novel organizational action in a spontaneous way” (Miner et al., 2001; Tabesh & Vera, 2020, p. 1; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Although an environment of self-efficacy would be important in crisis, the pre-crisis opportunity offers substantially more. If an organization could have a long-standing culture of self-driven creativity and decision-making, then it would just be a natural extension of an employee’s work during crisis. It just happens that it also specifically engages remote workers.

This discussion has repeatedly connected workplace freedom with the scholarship surrounding self-efficacy in remote worker populations. Staples et al. (2006) connected an employee’s belief that they could accomplish a task with their overall effectiveness as a remote worker. Additionally, since remote workers tend to be more isolated, their independence and ability to figure it out increases both productivity and employee engagement (Staples et al., 2006). There is a clear connection between workplace freedom and the remote worker population. Remote workers who are offered workplace freedom are more independent, effective, and productive employees.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, pre-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 2: Workplace Freedom, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.
Zone 3: Going Above & Beyond Roles. Lemon and Palenchar (2018) made it clear that the Zones overlap, but Zone 2 and 3 both overlap and can be distinguished from each other. While Zone 2 illustrated the workplace freedom to function outside a job description (i.e., passion projects), Zone 3, on the other hand, is defined differently. It is an employee who is not just doing more in an area that they are passionate about but rather an employee who truly shines in an extraordinary way. Specifically, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) characterize this work as going above and beyond, as required by their job function. Engagement was created when employees went above and beyond (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). However, it is also important to reiterate that over-engagement and going above and beyond are incredibly difficult to distinguish. Over-engaged employees who suffer from burnout and exhaustion could certainly be a hindrance to a crisis.

In addition to keeping employees out of the realm of exhaustion, going above and beyond is linked with pre-crisis management in many of the same ways that were discussed in Zone 2. Employees who possess self-efficacy and feel they can function in an above and beyond way within their job are critical on crisis management teams (Coombs, 2015a). The same discussion in improvisation applies, and the only difference between the two Zones in this conversation specifically is that Zone 2 focused on the workplace as a playground for doing more, and Zone 3 is specific to the job function (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). Although the two Zones are different, this component overlaps and is applicable in both areas of engagement. However, the propensity to slip into over-engagement, especially in the remote worker population, is a critical red flag to watch.

The concern for remote workers who go above and beyond is that they will overwork and burn out. Since remote workers work from home, their office is always available to them.
Robinson (2019) discussed employees who were “always-on” and how quickly this pace deteriorated (para. 5). Angelici and Profeta (2020) reported the remote workers outworked traditional workers in terms of hours, and Sull et al. (2020) said remote workers felt like they needed to be available all day, every day. The remote worker availability creates an above and beyond pace, but it can only last so long. With the additional challenges of working at home (i.e., distractions), how could employees possibly avoid exhaustion? Yet, aside from the discussion on over-engagement, workers are engaged in situations where they go above and beyond within their job functions. According to Lemon and Palenchar (2018), workers who simply met expectations in their job roles were considered disengaged. Going above and beyond could be considered a pre-pandemic norm for remote workers, just to create the impression of equality. However, post-pandemic with tight budgets and few jobs, the desire to go above and beyond could increase in remote populations. According to Monaghan (2021), career success comes hand in hand with going above and beyond (i.e., a strong work ethic), and employees must put in the hard work to be noticed within the remote worker marketplace. Going above and beyond applies to the remote worker population because it not only creates engagement but also creates perceived value within the remote worker population.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, pre-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 3: Going Above and Beyond, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model. Although the underlying reasoning is similar to Zone 2, this Zone merits its own place, given the specific definition.

**Zone 4: Work as a Vocational Calling.** This Zone captures the idea that the job “…is more than just a job” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 149). It could be a sense of accomplishment
or just an overwhelming passion for the activities within the job description. In Lemon’s (2019a) study connecting the Zones to government contractors, her adapted model did not include Work as a Vocational Calling within the core model but rather as bubbles that sat just outside the center. Lemon (2019a) suggested that Work as a Vocation was “already fulfilled…due to the nature of the work (i.e., government contracting)” (p. 9). Since this conversation is not focused on one area of remote work, it would be unlikely that any of the circles could be considered already fulfilled without a more industry-specific study. However, Work as a Vocational Calling will be generally evaluated from the perspective of pre-crisis and the remote worker population to determine the relevance of the Zone in this application.

While Zone 4 could be utilized during any stage of crisis, it has particular relevance in pre-crisis. In the earlier example, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study highlighted “taking on the identity of work” (p. 149). For example, an employee could shift their thinking from “I do marketing work” to “I am a marketer.” In crisis, this type of self-efficacy is, again, critical to success. Having discussed the value of self-efficacy extensively, it is important to note that if organizations want to empower employees in crisis, then they must plant those seeds in the pre-crisis stage. Therefore, creating a space for Work as a Vocational Calling lays the groundwork for an empowered employee who loves and knows their job and the organization before crisis strikes. While this Zone represents a passion and identity within a job, the Zone also offers a different spectrum for remote workers.

From the perspective of the remote worker, there is little concrete evidence that argues that a remote employee would be more or less engaged than a traditional employee in terms of vocational calling. Whether an employee is seated at home or in the office, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) research should hold true. In the previous section, the Zones were expanded
to capture the component of not just finding identity in the job but in the benefits that unfold because of the remote work environment. Hill et al. (2008a) suggested that combining work and family created a new “vitality” for all areas of an employee’s life. If a parent can now contribute to a child’s schooling due to remote work and virtual school, then the work/life balance and job as a vocation might be one and the same.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, pre-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 4: Work as a Vocational Calling, this Zone would be represented as a **large** circle within the pre-crisis Zones model. Remote workers only specifically applied to this Zone because of the expanded definition that included Vocational Calling from the job benefits.

**Zone 5: Creating Value.** In Zone 5, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) suggested that value was created for employees through “tackling challenging work or being in a position that aligns with one’s talents,” in addition to seeing the impact made within the organization and the community (p. 149). In other words, employee engagement is created when employees face difficult tasks, and they can see its impact on the larger body. Additionally, when recognition and appreciation are layered in this environment, especially in a spontaneous way, engagement was created. In Lemon’s (2019a) subsequent study using government contractors, she found that the surveyed contractors did not “cultivate value” within the organization, which made that zone unfilled for those participants (p. 6). Lemon (2019a) reported that even though the employees were given challenging work, they could not see “the value of their work at the organizational level” (p. 6). Lemon (2019a) found that this unfilled zone created a gap between employees and how their work was meeting the organization’s goals. Creating value demands challenging work,
recognition, and a visible impact in order to be effective in employee engagement (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018).

From the perspective of pre-crisis management, there would clear value for employees that were selected for crisis teams. Since all employees could be trained to monitor during pre-crisis within their specific departments, the opportunity to be a part of a crisis team could be widespread. The employee would be challenged, could receive recognition, and in the eventual crisis, would see an impact across the organization. Coombs (2015a) said that trained crisis employees were more valuable than crisis management plans. These valuable employees would not only be valuable in crisis but post-crisis and again in pre-crisis, if they were fully engaged.

In terms of remote workers, there is no evidence to support the idea that traditional workers and remote workers would want to be valued differently. The thought that employees find engagement through challenging work that makes a difference in the organization, with the added benefit of recognition, appears to transcend the division between remote and traditional workers. As previously discussed, the remote worker population was undervalued, which decreased the value available for that entire population (Hammer et al., 2005; Voydanoff, 2007; Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Fortunately, the post-pandemic workforce would level the playing field and create an equal opportunity for remote workers to receive value from their organizations. Creating value for remote workers would likely create the same engagement that it would for traditional workers.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, pre-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 5: Creating Value, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.
Zone 6: Building Connections. Zone 6 is the “desire to have a sense of belonging” (Lemon, 2019a). Employees, according to Lemon and Palenchar (2018), build connections by identifying with the mission, with their work, and with other employees. More specifically, employees also highlighted their connections with leadership as a pathway to engagement (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). Lemon and Palenchar (2018) wrote, “the more engaged management is with employees, the more likely connections will develop that lead to employee engagement experiences” (p. 150). Lemon (2019a) found in the subsequent student that leadership needed to drive connection with employees instead of the other way around. The conversation needed to be genuine rather than saddled with other intentions (Lemon, 2019a). Overall, connections could be built through many facets of the organization, but all resulted in increased employee engagement.

In terms of pre-crisis management, building connections is key to the primary goal in pre-crisis: avoiding the crisis. Heath and Nelson (1986) stated that employees were key contributors to crisis prevention. Paine (2011) agreed and suggested that listening to internal stakeholders was a major key to avoiding crisis. The relationships built trust and enabled the employees to not only connect and engage but to partner in avoiding crisis. Fischer et al. (2016) included trust in their barriers of crisis communication because populations could not receive information from a group if there was not trust established. Building connections created a pathway for two-way crisis communication, which could change the landscape for crisis management.

From the perspective of remote workers, there is a direct tie to the need for connection within this population. As discussed previously, the primary driver in remote work success was strong employee/management communication (Donaldson, 1990; Stanton & Buskirk, 1987; Staples, 1996; Staples et al., 2006), yet the majority of remote workers struggled to build
relationships (Nancherla, 2010). Ultimately, remote workers who did not connect and did not feel supported would eventually abandon their roles and seek traditional work (Kwon et al., 2019). In order to keep a remote population engaged, connections must be built between the employee and the organization, their work, co-workers, and leadership.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, pre-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 6: Building Connections, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Pre-Crisis Zones of Engagement Model.** With engagement previously established by Lemon and Palenchar (2018), two questions were asked in the evaluation of this model: 1) Is this type of engagement needed in pre-crisis management? 2) Does this type of engagement apply to the pre-crisis stage. The answer was a resounding yes. With all of the circles represented as large circles, which included research that connected each zone to pre-crisis management and remote worker populations, the diagram would be similar to the original Zones of Engagement diagram. All zones could create engagement that would value a pre-crisis management scenario in the remote worker population.

**Crisis.** With the value of engagement in each zone established (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), the previous section documented the scholarly research that connected pre-crisis management and the remote worker population with each zone. Without evidence to prove otherwise, it could be assumed that while the crisis stage could change priorities (i.e., between pre-crisis to crisis), the remote worker population still had the same victories, challenges, and needs. Given that established information, this section will explore documented connections between each zone and the crisis stage. The remote worker evaluations for each zone will remain constant from pre-crisis to crisis unless otherwise noted. After a short review of the crisis
stage-specific points of relevance, this section will establish applicable research examining the relevance of each zone in the crisis stage. While all the zones could still be effective in the crisis stage, this analysis will highlight the zones that actually contribute to the goals of crisis management within the crisis stage.

**Summary of Stage-Specific Crisis-Communication Initiatives.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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       | • Stakeholder uncertainty = stakeholder anxiety (Coombs, 2015a, p. 113).  
       | • Crisis teams often have to convince organizations that they are, in fact, in crisis (Coombs, 2015a, p. 114).  
       | • The MUM Effect illustrates fear over releasing negative information for fear of repercussions (Coombs, 2015a; Stohl & Redding, 1987). |

**Zone by Zone Analysis.** As mentioned above, this section will highlight connections between crisis management goals during the crisis stage and the characteristics of each zone. Since connections between remote workers and each zone have already been established, this section will solely focus on crisis management connections. The sizes of the circles established above will still apply, which would mean that all circles in this section would either be medium or large. Based on the previous data, medium circles would suggest that a particular zone was a tool for engagement and one well-suited for the remote worker population. Large circles would suggest that the particular zone was well suited for remote worker populations, was a tool for engagement, and connected with the specific components of the crisis stage.
Zone 1: Non-work-related Experiences at Work. Based on the stated definition of the Non-work-related Experiences at Work zone and the strategic goals of the crisis stage, there are no direct connections between the two; however, there are practical considerations. Employees found engagement when managers commented on their life outside of work. Given that employee uncertainty could lead to anxiety (Coombs, 2015a), it would be safe to assume that managers who know their employee’s circumstances outside of work could speak directly to potential concerns during crisis to circumvent concern. For example, if rumors about layoffs were circulating during crisis, then a manager who knew their employee well would know that the employee’s spouse had been laid off as well and could speak directly to those concerns. Knowing the non-work-related experience of an employee could help ease anxiety and potentially prevent the employee from leaving the organization out of fear of a layoff. According to Ferstler (2020), 38% of post-pandemic employees said they no longer felt mentally healthy, which was up 11% from pre-pandemic polls (para. 5). With mental health issues on the rise, the manager/employee connection could make the difference in crisis management and communication.

Since research and practical evidence supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 1: Non-work-related Experiences at Work, this zone would be represented as a large circle within the crisis zones model.

Zone 2: Workplace Freedom. As in the pre-crisis stage, the freedom to take educated risks for the good of the organization is critical during crisis. As Coombs (2015a) suggested, there is great value placed on improvisation and quick decision-making in crisis. The pre-crisis stage discussion of this zone prepared employees for crisis, but this stage puts those efforts into
action. The opportunities for engagement in this stage would celebrate employees who used their quick-thinking and creativity to push the organization through and hopefully out of the crisis stage.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 2: Non-work-related Experiences at Work, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the crisis Zones model.

**Zone 3: Going Above & Beyond Roles.** In this zone, like Workplace Freedom, this is the type of behavior that pre-crisis managers want to create. When it is exhibited during crisis, it must be encouraged and rewarded. During Hurricane Katrina, a CVS store manager had to be rescued from the roof of his home but made his way to the store, albeit barefoot, to open the door for desperate customers (Employees, 2006). If this manager had been reprimanded, the story would likely have ended differently. The opportunity to reward going above and beyond in the midst of crisis is critical to the overall crisis effort.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 3: Going Above and Beyond Roles, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Zone 4: Work as a Vocational Calling.** As discussed in the pre-crisis section, Work as a Vocational Calling has many direct connections to action in crisis. Uniquely, this zone could actually happen, given the right environment, in crisis. An employee who struggled to find purpose might suddenly, in the midst of a crisis, find more meaning in their work (Coombs, 2015a). If managers enlist the help of employees, especially trained employees, during crisis, engagement opportunities could organically present themselves. However, this is not necessarily something that could be strategically activated on the spot if managers were not knowledgeable
of their employees. Yet, as previously discussed, employees can derive engagement from helping others (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), and there are a multitude of opportunities in crisis. Even though the efforts to utilize this zone would likely happen organically, it is still an opportunity to connect this zone with the crisis stage.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 4: Work as a Vocational Calling, this zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Zone 5: Creating Value.** During the crisis stage, value can be created when employees see the impact they make on the community (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). In other words, employees feel engaged when they make a difference. In the crisis stage, employees have an opportunity to make a difference. Given the previously presented research behind this clear opportunity, creating value would be an obvious opportunity during the crisis stage.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 5: Creating Value, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Zone 6: Building Connections.** Within the crisis stage, the opportunity to connect with other employees could actually elicit engagement. Being in crisis together could create bonds, and those connections could strengthen relationships across the organization. Working together on a common project had a clear connection in Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study to engagement. Similarly, crisis could be that common project.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 6: Non-work-related Experiences at Work, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.
**Crisis Zones of Engagement Model.** The Crisis Zones of Engagement Model is based on the previous information established for both engagement and remote worker populations. Each zone in this model was valuable in the crisis stage, which was similar to the Pre-Crisis model. While the Pre-Crisis Zones of Engagement Model planted the seeds for engagement, the Crisis Zones of Engagement Model actually saw the fruit of those efforts. With that in mind, the Pre-Crisis opportunities were invaluable. However, the opportunity to create engagement in crisis could still stand alone. Creating employee relationships and rewarding self-efficacy were just two ways that engagement could be created even in the midst of crisis.

**Post-Crisis.** Similar to the crisis stage, both engagement (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018) and the remote worker connection were established in the pre-crisis section. In this section focused on the post-crisis stage, the central discussion is establishing whether or not research connects each Zone with post-crisis. Therefore, the research established in the pre-crisis remote worker discussion will be consistent in post-crisis. Since post-crisis closes down the crisis and then the lifecycle begins again with pre-crisis, it will be important to draw a clear line between what might be ongoing with pre-crisis and what is needed to resolve the crisis. With this in mind, this discussion will explore the post-crisis stage and determine the relevance for each zone of engagement in order to establish a Post-Crisis Zones of Engagement Model.

**Summary of Stage-Specific Crisis-Communication Initiatives.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Summary Points of Relevance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-Crisis</td>
<td>• Ask all stakeholders for feedback (Coombs, 2015a, p. 163).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Organizational memory, or storage and retrieval, takes place in stakeholders (Coombs, 2015a, p. 170).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Zone by Zone Analysis. Since the post-crisis stage is focused on resolving and documenting the crisis, it seemed few zones would have an opportunity to flourish here. The pre-crisis stage planted the seeds. Then the crisis stage watched them grow, and the post-crisis stage had the opportunity to examine the process and strategically evaluate it for the future. With this in mind, nearly every zone had an opportunity to capture additional employee engagement. While this is a great opportunity for organizations to evaluate their efforts in crisis and engagement, it is also an opportunity to continue engaging, which is the focus of this section.

Zone 1: Non-work-related Experiences at Work. Coombs (2015a) suggested that all stakeholders be surveyed for their post-crisis feedback. In these interviews, leadership has such an opportunity to not only ask for feedback from the work perspective but from the home perspective. Remote workers, who suffered through child care challenges and work environment challenges during the pandemic, cannot simply tell the story of their job duty challenges. The story would not be complete without the implications that faced them at home, which was actually their office, or some blurred line in between. Sharing these Non-work-related Experiences at work offer an opportunity for the employee to share their experience and to have their experience acknowledged by the manager. This zone contributes to both post-crisis management and creates engagement for the remote worker population.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, post-management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 1: Non-work-related Experiences at Work, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

Zone 2: Workplace Freedom. Since Workplace Freedom creates engagement by offering employees the space to be creative within their job function (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), this freedom could be celebrated in post-crisis recognition efforts. Similar to the efforts in Zone 1,
celebrating Workplace Freedom would both further engage and provide analysis of the ways in which crisis was handled by employees. The creative methods that were invented during crisis by employees would promote Workplace Freedom in the organization. If the lack of recognition is a primary reason why people leave their organizations (Brangwyn, 2020, para. 4), then recognition, crisis analysis, and engagement through Workplace Freedom would completely change an employee’s trajectory.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, post-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 2: Workplace Freedom, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Zone 3: Going Above & Beyond Roles.** When employees go above and beyond the roles in their job description, they feel engaged (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). Very similar to the above discussion, when employees go above and beyond in crisis, then their actions should be recognized in post-crisis evaluations, which champions the behavior for other employees in crisis and non-crisis situations. Employees are then encouraged to go above and beyond, which creates engagement and crisis success. Additionally, employees are recognized, which has been proved to create value (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). When these components are celebrated, analyzed, and recognized, organizations and their employees win.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, post-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 3: Going Above and Beyond Roles, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Zone 4: Work as a Vocational Calling.** This zone is not one that someone can plan for, but if it organically happens, then there is no reason to exclude it from the post-crisis model. If an employee finds that their job and their passions meet during crisis, then their work contributes
towards their engagement in the workplace. Certain personalities and cultures have a higher propensity to help those in need, and when that effort is engaged during an organization’s time of need, then it creates engagement. The passion for helping others turns a profession into a vocation. According to Scott (2017), a “purpose-filled environment” drives organizational engagement and fulfills employees on a deep and personal level (para. 16). The opportunity to acknowledge this transformation and leverage it for the future of individual employees would be exceptionally beneficial to the long-term success of an organization.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, post-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 4: Work as a Vocational Calling, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Zone 5: Creating Value.** As documented numerous times with this section and chapter, recognition is a primary key in creating value, which is a primary driver of employee engagement (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). Each of the zones in the post-crisis stage are applicable to driving value in post-crisis analysis and engagement because of their connections to recognition. While all of the zones, thus far, have value outside of recognition, each zone is magnified when it is used to acknowledge and recognize employees during crisis. Additionally, a crisis could create an impact outside of the organization. As previously discussed, this is another driver of engagement through Creating Value. There are countless opportunities to create value post-crisis, which offers just as many opportunities for engagement.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, post-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 5: Creating Value, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.
**Zone 6: Building Connections.** The section has discussed how employees build connections through organizational mission, their work, relationships with other employees, and relationships with leaders (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). Driving home the connections with the mission in post-crisis discussions could clearly align efforts and intentions. Additionally, the acknowledgment that employees are a key holder of organizational crisis memory not only builds value but opens a door for conversation and relationship-building between employees and leaders within the organization (Coombs, 2015a). Furthermore, the unintentional connections employees made during crisis are an organic result of a crisis, which could prove to be beneficial in the future. Recognitions of employee value and the relationship building that manifests within post-crisis conversation and analysis would benefit both the crisis management efforts and opportunities for engagement.

In summary, since research supports the presence of opportunities for engagement, post-crisis management, and remote worker satisfaction in Zone 6: Building Connections, this Zone would be represented as a large circle within the pre-crisis Zones model.

**Post-Crisis Zones of Engagement Model.** With documented research establishing the connections between engagement and the remote worker population, this section focused on the connection between all the zones and the post-crisis stage. Initially, it appeared that since the post-crisis stage was focused on analysis and post-crisis documentation, that engagement would not be a priority. Yet, with an overarching lens of recognition, this dissertation would suggest that engagement opportunities were available in every zone and only increased when recognition was offered. Future studies in this area might prioritize one zone over another, but this analysis found value in each zone during the post-crisis stage.

**Analysis of Completed Stage-Specific Models**
Although it seemed unlikely that each zone would find a place in each stage, the final result proved otherwise. All six zones were relevant in all three stages of crisis management. While some zones would create more of an impact if rooted in the pre-crisis stage, all zones, if experienced, contributed towards the success of crisis management and employee engagement for remote worker populations. Although discussed in more detail at the end of this discussion, additional research should be performed to test actual employees against this model. As in Lemon’s (2019a) study on government contractors, some zones could be more prominent in a real crisis situation with remote workers. However, given the difficulty in providing data specific to this effort, the overwhelming relevance of the Zones of Engagement in crisis management with remote worker populations was staggering. In the end, the only modification made to Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement was in broadening the definition of each zone to include the remote worker. With clear connections established between crisis management, engagement, and remote workers, the next section will offer paths for future research in order to solidify the proposed framework in an effort to better communicate with post-pandemic, remote employee worker groups in the marketplace.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Take a moment to apply the Zones of Engagement in crisis management to Tim. Remember Tim? He and Louie are probably somewhere in Washington, hatch open, working away on two monitors as the sun skims the lake. Although we do not know for sure, it is likely that Tim experienced engagement through many of the Zones. Maybe only one, work as a vocation, but in the biggest of ways. If his employer reexamined their relationship through the zones, Tim would be less likely to leave and more likely to continue on his epic adventure. A
dedicated, creative employee is worth preserving. A dedicated, creative, engaged employee could withstand the pivot of a crisis and lead the charge into the great unknown.
Chapter 5: Next Steps

With a modified framework in hand that bridges the gap between internal crisis communication and the post-pandemic remote worker population, the final step in this interpretive approach is to translate this scholarship into the beginnings of applicable strategies and tactics for the real-life marketplace. As a former practitioner, this author has personally experienced the frustration of research that was too theoretical to apply, given the need to act quickly. This section will first discuss this scholar/practitioner disconnect, then offer a blueprint to potentially guide marketplace leaders in facilitating engagement experiences throughout the crisis lifecycle to post-pandemic remote workers. Then, this section will recommend the next steps in research and considerations that should be made, given the complexity of the population.

This final section will begin with Sam’s story, which will illustrate a different take on the post-pandemic remote worker population. For some, like Sam, the reset is to finally go back to work. The reset is not #vanlife or a mountain view; it is to remove the hikers and put back on the heels. This population is not just a hybrid of remote workers and traditional workers, it is also a combination of those who have changed their minds. Preferences, family situations, dreams, and career goals have changed our employees, and it is the opportunity of the workplace to change with them.

Where Do We Begin?

Sam frantically threw all of her clothes into a bag, packed her car, and left Knoxville in the dust. “I’ll be right there,” she told her best friend. “Right there” was nearly seven hours away from her home-based office in Knoxville and days away from the HGTV Headquarters in New York.
Her best friend’s mother had just had a seizure at home. This was yet another medical complication in her life and another challenge for her best friend. Sam raced to help, taking advantage of an opportunity that would not have been available to her in her former life as a traditional workplace employee. For two weeks, she was able to meet a personal need and continue to succeed professionally. Sam summarized the benefits of her remote working situation, saying, “I feel very fortunate to have been quarantining at home due to remote work and to have the equipment I can take with me anywhere, so I could help cook and clean and be as present as possible” (Joneswood, 2021).

Unlike some of the other people we have met on this journey, Sam does not love remote work. She was sent home during the pandemic and is looking forward to the day she can go back. Sam believes she is “probably an anomaly... where I would gain more if I went back to the office” (Joneswood, 2021). Sam is based in Nashville. Her bosses work out of New York City. Working from two different time zones extends the workday. To stay present for all the meetings and conversations, she normally works 8 am to 6 pm and then logs back on after 8 pm to catch up on what she was not able to do during the day. Remote work has Sam logging significantly more hours than her previous in-office lifestyle. Not only will her hours decrease when she goes back to the office, but traditional work would encourage her to take a vacation. Additionally, she said her office is closer to shopping and grocery stores, so errands were easy before she worked at home.

Sam is ready to go back to the cubicle, but there is no sign of that happening in the immediate future. She is ready to push reset. Although Sam does not thrive in a remote environment, she appreciates the flexibility and would like to benefit, at least occasionally, from that type of work in the future. However, she looks forward to the day when communication and
access to her colleagues resume in a more conventional workplace relationship. Sam is not a #VanLifer, nor is she content to replace her high heels with hikers tucked into the mountains of Tahoe. She loves going into the office, seeing people, checking out at 5 pm, and completely separating her home and work life.

While the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers framework would extend to her remote working position, Sam is the perfect example of someone who needs engagement from home. She wants to be engaged. The marketplace has an opportunity to reach her through engagement experiences to increase retention, loyalty, and job performance throughout the crisis lifecycle. The Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers is an exciting framework to present, but it should be applied directly to the post-pandemic employees in order to reap the benefits of this research.

In this concluding chapter, this interpretive discussion will take the key emergent themes from the modified Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers and begin to explain how post-pandemic remote employees experience engagement during the crisis lifecycle. These themes, condensed and simplified under the abbreviation R.E.S.E.T., could advance the theoretical model in order to further bridge the gap between strategic and crisis communication and the new remote working population. The practical goal is to provide guidance to crisis managers, human resource managers, and communication leaders within the marketplace. Following the suggested practical application of the modified framework is a direction for future research. The opportunities are significant, and the interplay of practical application and theoretical foundations will strengthen this critical area of research.

However, before the practical application can be successful, it is important to identify and acknowledge Claeys and Opgenhaffen’s (2016) divide between scholarship and the marketplace.
These scholars studied this connection and offered two solutions to ensure research is successfully delivered to the marketplace. Accessibility and customization are key in delivering dense theoretical insights to a marketplace that is already behind.

**The Disconnect Between Theoretical and Practical in Crisis**

This dissertation has succeeded in modifying an existing framework to theoretically connect internal crisis communication to the post-pandemic remote worker population through employee engagement, but the marketplace needs practical steps to prioritize engagement within their organizations. This interpretive dissertation could be sent to corporations across the globe, but from this author’s experience, it will sit unread on the shelf. This discussion is too long, too time-consuming, and too academic in nature to be usable for the busy corporate leader who just wants to know what to do.

Since the intention of this work is to help organizations better communicate with post-pandemic remote workers, there needs to be a practical way to explain and engage the modified framework. Simply sharing this research or posting findings to a practitioner blog is not the way to do it. The nature of crisis situations demands something more accessible and memorable and for good reasons.

According to Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016), many practitioners do not apply crisis communication theory in practice and, in fact, point to a huge “scholar-practitioner divide” (p. 232). Both scholars and practitioners can work to bridge the gap but in diverse ways. Practitioners want scholars to provide information that meets their specific needs, which would suggest that scholars need to deliver relevant information and partner with practitioners to apply it to specific organizations (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Conversely, practitioners have an equal opportunity to promote scholarly work in conferences, blogs, or industry conversations.
Practitioners struggle with the abstract presentation of theoretical work, but these theories are meant to be abstract so that they can apply to many industries and populations (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Scholars would suggest that practitioners have an opportunity to better understand theoretical work so they can apply it in their own situations. But this is easier said than done.

As a former practitioner and now a scholar of crisis communication, this challenge is real, both from the perspective of a practitioner and as a scholar. In a world where most practitioners are inundated with work, meetings, now Zoom meetings, and digital information, there is little time to engage in a side project to connect an abstract framework with a time-sensitive project. Would practitioners be more informed if they had the opportunity to dive into scholarly research? Yes. Unfortunately, it is an unlikely luxury, as the pressures and unassigned duties are likely to block these efforts. The best way to connect practitioners with scholarly content is to present it in a tailor-made way (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016)—a way that connects research to the marketplace directly. Not only do scholars need to go into the marketplace to deliver their content, but they should partner with organizations to accomplish their goals.

Although information often reaches the practitioner population, Shapiro et al. (2007) pointed to a “lost-in-translation gap,” which suggested that somewhere between the information delivery and receipt, the importance and main ideas of the content are misunderstood (p.249). For example, in Claeys and Opgenhaffens’s (2016) study of the transmission of information between scholars and practitioners, practitioners said they did not feel that they needed to respond immediately in crisis or under all circumstances, despite the abundance of published research that supports the necessity of a quick response. Not only are practitioners not buying into the primary findings in crisis communication and management, but they are not even certain
that it applies to their work (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). This practitioner delay can have “serious implications on the outcomes of their crisis communication efforts” (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016, p. 242).

While organizations are more ready to delay a response to crisis and reduce legal liability (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016), they are much less ready to follow scholarly advice (i.e., apologize early), which offers ideas that are well-researched and beneficial for reducing reputational consequences (Lee & Chung, 2012). Coombs' (2015a) work confirms these ideas as well. Therefore, a reset is needed. This gets the conversation started by shifting from a framework for consideration to practical strategies that will help communicate effectively to remote worker populations in moments of crisis. Based on Claeys and Opgenhaffen’s (2016) study, two strategies are necessary to be successful in reaching practitioners. First, scholars need to step towards the marketplace with a condensed framework, and second, they must partner with organizations to tailor this content to their needs. As a first step, this dissertation offers a proposed blueprint based on the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers. This blueprint, nicknamed R.E.S.E.T., could help to bridge the gap between the “scholar-practitioner divide” and present information to the marketplace in a format that is easy to implement.

Practitioner’s Blueprint

One of the noted challenges throughout this interpretive work was bringing theory and practice together. This section will propose a strategy, entitled R.E.S.E.T, which could bridge yet another gap between the theorist framework and the practitioner. It is important to recommend usable and teachable guidelines based on the modified framework to equip practitioners with information ready for implementation. In reality, most employees encounter crisis unprepared, untrained, and will have little time to research the most beneficial path to take to lay the
foundation for future success. Furthermore, employees in crisis do not have time to structure their strategies and communication that benefit both crisis and engagement. In an effort to simplify this research and provide a clear path to post-crisis success and engagement, a practical strategy should be applied to communication efforts. The R.E.S.E.T. strategy proposes five foundations to apply to crisis management efforts that could strengthen crisis management efforts and employee engagement. This section will tie R.E.S.E.T. directly to the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers, which will provide specific and prescriptive suggestions into how to communicate in the crisis lifecycle with remote employees. This section will explore the gap between scholarship and the marketplace, then establish a proposed strategy that can be applied by any employee in any organization to improve the outcome of crisis and establish ongoing employee engagement.

*Introducing R.E.S.E.T.*

Throughout this project, we have talked about a reset from the perspective of remote workers who figuratively pressed the button to keep the same job and start a new life. They reset their boundaries, their limits, their work hours, and their goals. Their rules have changed. Sarah put away the high heels, broke out the hiking boots, and now lives the best of both worlds. Matt dumped his savings into a vintage dream, set up to manage his workload and his camping gear. Jill went to quit and accepted a new life with a great job and a better view. Tim advocated for something off the wall that delivered freedom that did not seem possible. Sam, well, Sam loved the old life but was grateful for a balance between traditional and remote when a personal crisis came to call. Sarah, Matt, Jill, Tim, and Sam have changed the rules. If employees and their preferences are rising to the forefront, then perhaps, as organizations, we are called to reset too. We are called to think differently. Pressing R.E.S.E.T. is not intended to change the corporate
world. It is just asking corporations to consider a new perspective. In the following section, this discussion will first show how the proposed R.E.S.E.T. strategy grew out of the Crisis Zones of Engagement. Then, the strategy will be outlined in a way that is practical and meaningful to busy leaders in the marketplace.

**The R.E.S.E.T Strategy**

The proposed R.E.S.E.T. Strategy is designed to simplify and condense the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers in an effort to follow Claeys and Opgenhaffen’s (2016) recommendation of bringing scholarly content directly into the workplace. As a former practitioner, this author can attest to the need of being handed a simple strategy that is easy to implement. This Crisis Zones of Engagement Framework for Remote Workers has the potential to revolutionize crisis communication to this specific population, but it can only be successful if practitioners utilize the information. With this in mind, the R.E.S.E.T. strategy will condense and simplify the framework, delivering recommendations directly into the ready hands of practitioners within the marketplace.

**Making Crisis Simple: Practical Strategies Based on the Modified Framework.** With the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers in one hand and a blank piece of paper in the other, this interpretive discussion offers a simplified version of the framework to assist crisis practitioners within their organizations. The proposed R.E.S.E.T. strategy is an abbreviation for five key themes: Relationships, Empathy, Self-Efficacy, Employee Recognition, and Training. While the mnemonic device lists five major themes from the modified framework, the themes are not in any particular order, could happen simultaneously, and all overlap, similar to the thought-process behind Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement. All of these five themes repeatedly rise in the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers. Prioritizing
these themes could create opportunities for post-pandemic remote employees to experience engagement during all stages of crisis. Instead of telling practitioners how employees experience crisis, this scholarship will provide practitioners recommendations on how to deliver communication that encourages the engagement experience. In other words, this strategy can teach practitioners how to foster engagement based on a modified framework that informs scholars how employees experience engagement. This section will walk through this proposed strategy step-by-step, in an effort to first root the strategy to the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers and second, to offer insights on actual applications for this practical content. Beginning with R., or Relationships, this section will break down the proposed strategy and offer its attributes for real-life practical application.

**R: Relationships.** When analyzing the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers for themes, one of the overarching ways that employees experienced engagement was through relationships. In the Non-work-related Experiences Zone, employees experienced engagement when they were “treated as a human, not a worker or asset” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 148). Examples of this zone included sending birthday cards or finding commonalities in interests, which involves knowing enough about the employee to discover these opportunities for connection. When the definition of this zone was expanded for remote workers, components such as child care and family support were included. Knowing an employee’s family situation, especially during the pandemic, could provide remote workers who are struggling with child or elderly care opportunities to experience engagement. When leadership recognizes the non-work elements of an employee because they have a relationship, the employee can feel more secure in their position. In the Work as a Vocation zone, relationships would be critical in knowing an employee enough to connect their desired vocation with their potential. Additionally, Lemon and
Palenchar (2018) said that building connections (i.e., Building Connections Zone) with the organization’s mission, within the employee’s job role, and with other employees also offered opportunities for employees to experience engagement. These relationships not only create engaging experiences for employees but also fulfilled their desire for a “close connection to the company and the work” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 150). Out of the six zones, half of them prioritized relationships, especially between leadership and employees, in order to create connection, which assisted employees in experiencing engagement. The better organizations know their employees, the better they can engage them. But it is also important to remember that all of these zones were theoretically aligned with the crisis lifecycle and the post-pandemic remote worker population. Relationships are important to the success of remote workers and during the three stages of the crisis lifecycle.

Relationships, a clear and significant theme in creating engagement experiences for employees, must be prioritized within organizations in order to maximize employee retention and effectiveness in crisis and create ongoing engagement experiences. Since this dissertation has focused on how employees experience engagement, it is important to reverse the topic and explain, through real-life narrative, how organizations can offer opportunities to experience engagement to employees. At Discovery (i.e., parent corporation for HGTV), the organization implemented Facebook Workplace, which is an Intranet chat tool for collaboration in the workplace. According to Joneswood (2021), “additional Workplace groups were created to support employees and offer relationship at different stages” (Joneswood, 2021). One of the most popular groups was the Home Alone, Together group, which supported employees who were quarantining alone around the globe (Joneswood, 2021). Created to foster relationships and
support, these groups also create engagement. The opportunities to create relationships abound in
digital workforces, but leaders must be intentional and provide the space to make them happen.

**E: Empathy.** The second component of the R.E.S.E.T strategy is empathy. According to
Psychology Today (2021), empathy is “the ability to recognize, understand, and share the
thoughts and feelings of another person…developing empathy is crucial for establishing
relationships and behaving compassionately” (para. 1). Similar to relationship, empathy is
needed in the post-pandemic remote workforce because people are panicked. Everything is
different. Masks, social distancing, limited travel, remote learning, and offices in the living room
are just some of the stressors in the employee work space during this temporary or permanent
season of post-pandemic remote work. Although empathy is not one of the specific terms utilized
in Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement, it is one of the major themes. According
to Lemon and Palenchar (2018), organizations need to know the employee outside of work (i.e.,
Non-work-related Experiences Zone), and they should embrace an employee’s vocational goals
(i.e., Work as a Vocation Zone). From a bigger perspective, empathy is actually a core
component of the Zones of Engagement as a whole. Organizations will have to buy into the value
of employees if they choose to pursue employee engagement. Employers who do not value
employees will not invest the effort that is required to prioritize employees.

Crisis communication scholar Seeger (2006) also prioritized empathy in crisis
communication and suggested, “if the public sees an expression of genuine concern and
empathy, it has more faith that the actions being undertaken or recommended are appropriate and
legitimate” (Seeger, 2006, p. 241). In other words, when organizations exhibit empathy, people
believe they are doing the right thing. If organizations can exhibit empathy in their internal crisis
communication, then employees (i.e., their publics) will not only buy into the communication but
can also experience engagement. Flipping the script, employees can experience engagement through empathy, but how can organizations deliver empathy to create those experiences? Remember Jill from Chapter 3? Jill’s boss showed empathy to her when she tried to quit. Jill wanted to travel, and her boss heard her desire and acted with empathy. She showed genuine concern. She, like the definition suggested, recognized the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of Jill (Psychology Today, 2021). Her empathetic response created engagement, and it fostered long-term organizational loyalty. If organizational leaders communicate with empathy, then employees will have more engagement experiences. There are countless ways to insert empathy into relationships in the post-pandemic workforce. From coaching individual employees to mass communication, empathy can make a difference. While empathy can change emotions instantly, building self-efficacy might take longer, but its payoff is monumental.

**S: Self-Efficacy.** Although self-efficacy is an often-used term in this interpretive discussion, its definition is worth a refresher. Self-efficacy is the confidence an individual holds that they can meet specific goals (Bandura, 2001; Rimer & Glanz, 2005; Seeger, 2006; Staples et al., 2006). They have the skills to do what they need to do and the confidence to make it happen. Specifically, Staples et al. (2006) found that when remote workers believed that they had the capacity to be successful in remote working, then they were more effective, productive, and had increased job satisfaction. Confident remote workers were more engaged remote workers (Staples et al., 2006). In terms of the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers, there are specific zones that thrive off of self-efficacy, pushing it to the forefront on this list of major themes. Lemon and Palenchar (2018) found that self-efficacy was a key to experiencing engagement in the Freedom in the Workplace, Going Above and Beyond, and in the Work as a Vocation zones.
Beginning in the Freedom in the Workplace zone, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) hooked freedom to explore within the job role as a means of engagement. This was a freedom to risk and even potentially fail without major repercussions from the organization (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). As previously discussed, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) work connected directly with research about remote workers through self-efficacy. (Staples et al., 2006). Employees have the freedom to be creative in their job functions if they are fully confident in their abilities. Self-efficacy is Freedom in the Workplace, but it also can be freedom to work confidently at home. Similarly, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Going Above and Beyond zone saw engagement experiences open up for employees who were going above and beyond in the organization. People cannot go above and beyond if they are not confident in their organization and in their roles. Finally, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) also linked to self-efficacy in the Work as a Vocation zone. Using the same example from the previous discussion, an employee could shift their thinking from “I do marketing work” to “I am a marketer.” This kind of shift can bring confidence and ownership to a career. Cultivating self-efficacy in an organization can offer many opportunities for employees to experience engagement. But how do we cultivate this deeply intangible experience?

According to scholars in self-efficacy (Bandura, 1978; Fencel & Scheel, 2005; Taylor, 2012), there are several ways for organizations to boost the self-efficacy amongst their employees. Employees need to have simple yet stretch goals, which are not too overwhelming, but also push them forward into a new level of achievement (Chowdhury, 2021). Additionally, employees are well-served to have a visionary mindset, so they can see the big picture, whether the situation is positive or negative. Employees also boost their self-efficacy when they are able to reframe obstacles which begin with the idea that failure is inevitable (Chowdhury, 2021).
Things to do go wrong, we could fail, but we can reframe that experience and grow confidence in our knowledge base. Leaders can create these experiences in order to foster the development of self-efficacy.

At Discovery, when the world shifted to remote work, the worldwide organization implemented the #DiscoveryWorksRemote Virtual Town Hall (Joneswood, 2021). These webinar-type bi-weekly meetings shared vision and challenges directly from the CEO to pandemic remote workers across the globe. Since the organization is the parent company of The Food Network and HGTV, they would also host special guests like Bobby Flay and Chip, and Joanna Gaines to motivate their workforce (Joneswood, 2021). Discovery is delivering vision on a bi-weekly basis to an enormous digital workforce. Additionally, they are modeling the idea that obstacles will come, but the organization and its employees will overcome. Through these Virtual Town Halls, Discovery is cultivating self-efficacy. When employees have freedom at work and go above and beyond, the next step in the R.E.S.E.T. strategy is recognition.

**E: Employee Recognition.** In Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Creating Value zone, employees experience engagement when they see the impact they have made on their organization and the community at large. Spontaneous recognition was considered the most valuable in Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) study and often led to the most organic moments of employee engagement. These organic moments, however, were planned by someone. Some leader had to decide to offer this organic response. Some leader had enough knowledge of an employee to stop whatever they were doing and recognize those achievements. Saji (2014) also prioritized recognition in his work and suggested that rewards and recognition from managers were key in creating engagement during crisis. In order to create value and employee engagement in the post-pandemic remote workforce, a strategic effort will have to be made by
leadership to intentionally and personally recognize employees in a way that delivers authenticity and appreciation.

According to Littlefield (2020), there are a number of ways that employers can motivate and recognize post-pandemic remote workers. These pandemic-specific suggestions will resonate now with employees but will also be applicable in the future. Littlefield (2020) suggested calling employees to say, “thank you.” Although employees expect to receive a call from their leaders about work, an unexpected phone call of appreciation, with no strings attached, not only recognizes the employee but offers an opportunity for engagement. Littlefield (2020) also recommended gifts of free time to recognize hard-working employees since the commodity of “free time” is sparse, especially for parents, during the pandemic (para. 3). Gathering a group for a meeting, thanking them, and then canceling the meeting so they can have the time back is another way to recognize hard work (Littlefield, 2020). From sending a virtual handwritten thank you note to thank you videos, there are simple yet impactful ways to say thank you in this post-pandemic workforce (Littlefield, 2020). These seemingly insignificant acts can culminate into engagement and a culture of gratitude.

**T: Training:** All of the major themes overlap, very similar to the way that the zones overlap. Employee engagement is fluid and specific, so it not surprising to see common threads and major themes continuously overlapping within this strategy. Training, like in many scenarios, includes the other four major themes but focuses on the challenge that organizations have to teach employees not only how to deliver these themes but also receive them. Saji (2014) recommended training for self-efficacy and role empowerment in order to maximize crisis management effectiveness. Training is needed in forming relationships, communicating effectively with empathy, creating self-efficacy, and tactics in employee recognition.
The Zones of Engagement do not specifically advocate for training since the authors believed that engagement should be organic (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). According to Lemon and Palenchar (2018), if engagement experiences are manufactured, then the employee does not experience engagement in the same way. Yet, employees, at least from this author’s experience, are not all naturally gifted in relationships, empathy, cultivating self-efficacy, and recognition. While there is value in not having an employee engagement internal campaign, there is great value in training leaders to be better humans. Henry Ford, the owner of the Ford Motor Company, once said, “The only thing worse than training your employees and having them leave is not training them and having them stay” (Misra, 2018, para. 41). Organizations can hope for organic experiences, or they can teach their employees how to communicate in a proven way that encourages engagement experiences.

In one example, cultivating self-efficacy is a clear training initiative. If organizations want their employees to be more confident in their roles in order to make snap decisions during crisis and experience engagement on a regular basis, then the organization must be proactive. In order to build confidence in an employee’s role, then training must be a top priority. It is not an onboarding initiative or a quarterly refresher webinar but rather a culture of training that demands constant improvement and evolution in an employee’s role. As previously mentioned, an excellent example of self-efficacy training appeared in a hotel in Mumbai, India, on the day of a horrific terrorist attack. The employees of the hotel improvised, went above and beyond, and displayed their cultivated self-efficacy in every maneuver (Saji, 2014). The team was meticulously trained in decision making, customer service, and in their specific roles so that
when the crisis descended, they were ready. There was a culture of training and employee
engagement, which prepared the hotel for the unimaginable. That is the key. Organizations
cannot imagine the next crisis. Leaders can guess, but it is often far more complex than our
tabletop training exercises. Organizations cannot wait for the crisis to train their employees
(Coombs, 2015a). Training is not implemented when the world falls apart. Training needs to
happen at all times during the crisis lifecycle, especially when everything seems …good.

Remember Tim? He is on the road, traveling to somewhere named nowhere with his dog
Louie, watching the sunset, and getting ready to join a Zoom on the other coast. He fought for
engagement. He pursued management and begged for his highly paid nomad lifestyle, but
eventually, he will pursue them anymore. Eventually, he will likely move on unless they pursue
and re-engage him. Training is needed to teach managers to engage Tim, who is likely a worker
who everyone likes and leaves alone. Tim needs to be engaged, not just wanderlust if the
organization intends to keep him on the payroll. Training is key in delivering the first four letters
of R.E.S.E.T to the organizational masses.

Summary of the R.E.S.E.T. Strategy. R.E.S.E.T is a proposed, simplified strategy built
from a complex modified framework based on Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of
Engagement. The strategy is designed to inject the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote
Workers framework into the marketplace in a practical way that is condensed in a way that
makes it approachable for over-tasked managers and leaders. Again, these elements (i.e., R., E.,
S., E., T.) are listed in an order that is easy to remember, but they do not need to be completed in
any particular order. Rather, like Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement, they are
meant to be overlapping elements that are utilized strategically all at the same time. The
proposed R.E.S.E.T strategy takes the big ideas from the Crisis Zones of Engagement for
Remote Workers and creates a mnemonic device that can be applied to organizations at any stage of the crisis lifecycle. If the proposed R.E.S.E.T strategy is applied, then opportunities for employees to experience engagement could increase, which could also increase the likelihood of crisis success (Coombs, 2015a) and allow post-pandemic remote workers to thrive (Staples et al., 2006).

**Future Opportunity: Partner with the Marketplace.** Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) suggested two courses of action to avoid the “scholar-practitioner divide.” First, they recommended bringing information directly to the marketplace. The proposed R.E.S.E.T strategy, outlined above, simplifies and condenses the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers so practitioners could implement these complex ideas with ease. They do not have time or choose not to make time to read hundreds of pages of data in order to gain insight. They need a clear presentation and an easy-to-remember phrase (i.e., R.E.S.E.T.) with clear, practical strategies for success. Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) also suggested partnering with the practitioner in order to tailor this content to specific industries, organizations, and remote worker populations (i.e., parents, Millennials). While the modified Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers should first be tested in future quantitative and qualitative studies, the subsequent opportunities for partnership between scholars and practitioners are seemingly endless. There is practitioner value in this content, but the practitioner can maximize its value by receiving content from the scholar that specifically applies to their crisis, their organization, and their remote worker population. In the meantime, the proposed R.E.S.E.T. recommendations translate scholarship into a workable, usable strategy that can be applied to organizations that want to communicate with remote workers more effectively.
With a clear stage-specific theoretical framework and a practical strategy for the post-pandemic remote workplace, the next step would be to perform qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods studies to verify the theoretical findings and further validate the modified framework. The framework should be tested, but there are specific considerations that need to be strategically evaluated in order to understand the data. The value of the modified framework is that it applies engagement to crisis management and remote worker populations so that crisis success and increased employee engagement are products of the ongoing crisis lifecycle. If organizations can layer engagement efforts into their crisis lifecycle, then the outcome is a sustainable, ongoing effort to improve employee relations, retention, and manage crisis. With this in mind, future research must first test the framework, but with the understanding that population and industry differences could deeply impact the outcome of the studies.

**Future Research**

In order to validate the modified Zones of Engagement for remote populations from the perspective of crisis (Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers), the framework must be tested with real populations. Using a path similar to Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) initial exploration, this dissertation would recommend starting with a study that included employees from both for-profit, non-profit, and government industries. Additionally, Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) population included both male and female employees from different position levels, different states, and with varying years of service. As an initial study, this varied population could confirm or reject the proposed theoretical assertions that connect crisis, engagement, and remote workers. Their study also utilized a purposive and theoretical sampling approach (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), which would also be beneficial for future research in this area. Again, following the design of Lemon and Palenchar (2018), a phenomenological approach
would be taken, with open-ended interview questions. The “semi-structured interview guide with non-directive questions and narrative-reconstructed format was used to elicit responses” (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018, p. 146). Beginning with a conversation and transitioning to professional history, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) then asked targeted questions to capture employee engagement experiences. This dissertation would suggest that interviews take place on the phone or utilizing video-conferencing technology for privacy and ease of scheduling for remote workers. All interviews should be transcribed and analyzed through NVivo software (or a similar product used to organize qualitative data). With data collected, the study would then transition to analysis, which Lemon and Palenchar (2018) initiated with bridling. Bridling allowed “researchers to set aside (not remove) preconceived notions about a phenomenon,” which was followed by clustering of ideas into themes (Lemon and Palenchar, 2018, p. 147). However, the future study proposed for this work would test the framework, which is most similar to Lemon’s (2019a) study.

In Lemon’s (2019a) study, she used the same basic approach but also included feedback from focus groups and used an iterative approach (i.e., analyzed focus groups and interviews together). Using a code for each of the zones, Lemon (2019a) categorized the responses to reveal connections between the zones and the contractors’ responses. In outlining an initial future study for the Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers, ideas in the interviews should be coded to correlate with Zones. With a clear approach for future study, additional factors must be considered, specifically in terms of industry and population.

When Lemon and Palenchar (2018) initially tested the Zones of Engagement framework, they used a population made up of “individuals employed in the U.S. and receive a wage from a U.S. based organization, including both for-profit and government organizations” (p. 146). In a
subsequent study, Lemon (2019a) tested the framework on a specific population made up of government contractors. As previously discussed, some zones appeared in the results, and others did not, in addition to the fact that some Zones were not part of the government contracting culture. According to Lemon (2019a), government contracting, as an industry, did not prioritize creativity in their work (i.e., Freedom in the Workplace), so, therefore, it was not an area where employees could experience engagement. Lemon’s (2019a) modified framework for government contractors included the sphere Freedom in the Workplace, but it was outside of the integrated framework. In future studies, it will be important to recognize that the modified Zones of Engagement (i.e., for remote workers from a perspective of crisis management) could be deeply impacted by industry type and employee population. With this in mind, this dissertation would again recommend that a broad population be utilized in terms of gender, role, years of service, and remote location.

In recommending components of a future study, this interpretive discussion would be remiss not to recommend a deeply multi-cultural study. Given the misinterpretation between cultures in both remote work (Nancherla, 2010) and crisis communication and management (Fischer et al., 2016; Heath et al., 2009; Latre et al., 2018; Lee, 2017; Ravazzani, 2016), the inclusion of diverse cultures would be critical. Just as traditional and remote workers are not the same populations, there are many subsets of the post-pandemic remote worker population. In addition to culture and language differences, there are differences in work preferences between genders, generations, and based on industry. Paying attention to cultural, political, gender, generational differences – just to name a few – would be important in a vision for a future study.

With the basic confines of an initial study illustrated above, one of the challenging components would be the inclusion of crisis in the discussion. While Lemon (2019a) and Lemon
and Palenchar (2018) discussed engagement experiences, they were not discussing engagement within the context of crisis. Two of the central population requirements would include employees who had both experienced an organizational crisis and worked remotely during that crisis. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, a pool of eligible employees would not be difficult to recruit.

Once the initial framework (i.e., Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers) was validated, a number of subsequent studies could be performed to better understand specific populations in terms of engagement, crisis, and remote worker populations. Studies, like Lemon’s (2019a) exploration into connections between the zones and government contractors, offer opportunities to investigate engagement opportunities by industry. Other studies could be pursued that focused on specific genders or cultures to examine engagement opportunities within those special populations. With all of these special populations in mind, the primary focus would still connect engagement, crisis management, and the remote worker. While previous studies have set the stage for the future, the opportunities for future research seem limitless. Employee experiences that lead to engagement will be found in every industry and every cultural group, and researchers must seek to discover these opportunities.

**Where Do We Go from Here?**

This phenomenologically based, interpretive discussion sought to theoretically connect internal crisis communication to the post-pandemic remote worker population. This new population (i.e., post-pandemic remote workers) was relatively unknown from a research perspective, yet for the majority of 2020, it was the primary internal stakeholder in many organizations. This discussion adopted Coombs’ (2015a) idea that crisis is a lifecycle (i.e., an unending repetition of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis), and most organizations, as of mid-2021,
were caught somewhere between crisis and post-crisis, in terms of the pandemic. Additionally, many also experienced simultaneous compounding crises, which further crippled their ability to navigate the present stage of the marketplace successfully. In an effort to better communicate to post-pandemic remote employees during this crisis lifecycle, this dissertation found a bridge, employee engagement, to close the gap between crisis and the post-pandemic remote worker population. Through an interpretive discussion of theory and data rooted in strategic communication, this research concluded that engagement experiences increased remote worker overall satisfaction (Staples et al., 2006) and contributed to crisis management efforts in a beneficial way (Coombs, 2015a). This work modified Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement, altering the definitions of each zone to better fit the remote worker population. The modified Crisis Zones of Engagement for Remote Workers will serve as a launchpad for future research to better communicate to post-pandemic remote employees during crisis.

This project also broke new ground in the discussion of the post-pandemic remote workforce and the implications made on crisis management and employee engagement. Additionally, this effort connected crisis and engagement in a new and powerful way that equips organizations to provide continuous engagement experiences, regardless of their current stage within the crisis lifecycle. The repurposing of Lemon and Palenchar’s (2018) Zones of Engagement for crisis and the connection with remote workers created a theoretical foundation for the future and broke down walls of this once siloed research. Organizations can engage employees and manage a crisis in an engaging way. Organizations can emerge from crises stronger than they entered. The future of work prioritizes people, which positively impacts the bottom line (Sorenson, 2013), and creates organizations that weather the storms of crisis
(Coombs, 2015a). An organizational crisis is inevitable, but we have the power to create engaging remote workplaces, regardless of the season.

But most importantly, organizations have to remember that these employees are real people, with real families, with real dreams of hiking boots or heels, or maybe no shoes at all. They are the hearts of our organizations. Engaging the post-pandemic remote worker population will improve the bottom line, but it also gives these employees a chance to reset. The pandemic taught the world many lessons, but it also confirmed that our days on this earth are numbered. What will we make of them? What will we do? Organizations have an opportunity to press reset. The prioritization of our people will not fail. We can help our employees succeed both personally and professionally. Just press reset.
Epilogue: Grab Your Boots. Let’s Go!

Meet Erin. She is a wife, a mom of 4, and works in higher education, where she can set her schedule to meet her personal and professional goals. “Who wants to go hiking today?” she asks the kids. A chorus of “YES!” She grabs the shoes, fills the packs with water, downloads the trail map, and tucks some snacks into her bag, surprises for the mountain top. They ask, “Do you have to work today, Mom?” She answers, “I’m already done. I woke up early and knocked everything out so we could enjoy this sunny day.” “Awesome,” they say.

It is awesome. She, of course, is me. As a post-pandemic remote worker, even in the midst of the worldwide crisis, I am engaged, included, and known. My leaders know my children, and they know my priorities. They have equipped me to lead my team with confidence. They know I will get the job done, but it might be outside of traditional work hours. They know I will answer the phone most of the time, and if I miss a call, they know the reason. I swim in a sea of diapers, barking dogs, and homework questions – all of which exist in a balance that helps me succeed professionally and personally. I am called to do both. I could not find success with my previous organization, but success does exist. I was called to reset.

For now, you can find me working when my children are out of sight. Late at night, early in the morning, during nap time, and in long stretches during school or summer camp. And, some days, when the weather is perfect, and that sun hits just right, it is understood that I might be out of pocket for a few hours, lost in the woods. Forget FOMO. I am not missing anything. It’s all about YOLO now. And hey, “the mountains are calling, and I must go.”

But don’t worry. I’ll keep my phone on.
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Diving deeper into shared meaning-making: Exploring the zones of engagement within a single case study

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