Employees as heroes: Rebuilding customer relationships through post-crisis communications

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ABSTRACT

After large-scale service disruptions, organizations communicate with customers as part of their crisis recovery. Resuming service delivery often requires employees to conduct an impressive recovery performance to restore normal operating conditions. We shows that, in such circumstances, organizations can benefit from attributing the recovery to employees' heroism. In four experiments, messages bolstering employees' heroism have better effects on customers' responses than communications bolstering employees' effort or talent. Heroism's positive effect is explained by the account's ability to elicit feelings of admiration toward employees. The impact of heroism depends on several boundary conditions. As a hero must face adversity, accounts of heroism are stronger when evidence of the risks employees incur is provided. Furthermore, contextual evidence can discount heroism. Perceived high job demands or good employer reputation tend to reduce the impact of accounts of heroism.

Keywords: Service crisis, Heroism, Employees' performance

Track: Service Marketing & Service Innovation

Introduction

Service crises are large-scale disruptions to service provision that affect many stakeholders Past research on the effects of (Rasoulian et al., 2023) and recovery from (Khamitov et al., 2020; Rasoulian et al., 2023) service crises has examined events including weather-related incidents, cyberattacks, and the consequences of health crises (Gijsenberg et al., 2015). Staff effort is often necessary to resume normal operating conditions after a service crisis. In their responses to the affected stakeholders, organizations often praise such efforts, illustrating the sacrifices that were required of their service personnel. Past research shows that how employees' performance is communicated can have important effects on consumers' perceptions (Leung et al., 2020). Building on this insight, we propose that promoting employees' heroism exerts a significant positive effect on customers' responses over similar positively worded communications that focus instead on praising employees' level of effort or dedication. We conducted four empirical studies to test the effects of bolstering heroism embedded within an apologetic message in which a company expresses regret about the disruption.

Conceptual development

Building on heroization theories (Franco et al., 2018; Kinsella et al., 2015; Stanley et al., 2023), we reason that service crises caused by disruptive events beyond the direct control of the organization can lead to perceptions of heroism. Extant research on heroism shows that heroes typically protect or help others when they are affected by negative circumstances for which they are not responsible. In this sense, an external crisis such as weather-related events or cyberattacks represent prototypical situations where heroization is expected to emerge in collective perceptions (Allison and Goethals, 2015). We define bolstering heroism as a message that stresses employees' heroic efforts. Heroes are a common and culturally shared stereotype characterized by specific features (Franco et al., 2018). They are highly moral and competent figures who garner social appraisal for their courage, integrity, and willingness to face risks and make sacrifices to benefit others (Franco et al., 2018; Kinsella et al., 2015). This demonstrates the social value attached to the hero stereotype and illustrates why it would be advantageous to bolster employee heroism. In our context, bolstering heroism is a persuasive strategy to ascribe stereotypically heroic features—such as exceptional skills and bravery in the face of significant personal risks—to employees for their recovery performance (Franco et al., 2018). We compare the relative effectiveness of bolstering heroism to

bolstering employees' efforts. Unlike heroism, effort does not stress courage and sacrifice but rather positive terms indicating both the employees' skills and ability, as well as their care and concern for customers. Our goal, therefore, is to show that an account bolstering the specific dimension of heroism would yield more favorable customer responses than an account bolstering employees' effort.

Admiring heroes in a crisis

Social perception theories show that social targets held in high esteem for their abilities or virtuous behavior elicit feelings of admiration (Onu et al., 2016). In this respect, heroes elicit admiration because their feats are evidence of both competence and warmth (Kervyn et al., 2022). Admiration is a positive emotion expressing a positive evaluation and the superior status of a certain actor (Onu et al., 2016). Customers wish to help and support social agents that are objects of admiration (Aaker et al., 2012). We predicted that positive feelings of admiration toward the employees involved in recovery would transfer to the organization and lead to more positive customer responses after a crisis. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

> **H1:** Bolstering heroism (vs. bolstering effort) improves customer responses through the mediation of feelings of admiration toward employees.

Heroes' burden

Heroization theory shows that social perceptions of heroism can shift and depend on specific evaluations of the behavior considered and the circumstances that have caused it (Franco et al., 2018; Kinsella et al., 2015; Stanley et al., 2023). Consistent with this logic we examine boundary conditions that might intensify or weaken the impact of bolstering heroism. Heroes take on significant risks or costs for others' benefit. The positive stereotype of a hero rests on the idea of a risk or sacrifice that the hero will accept on behalf of or to benefit others. In our context, this evidence suggests that bolstering heroism might be more effective in combination with explicitly communicating the risks incurred by employees in their recovery performance. We propose that by stressing the risks employees face and, consequently, the potential sacrifices they incur, bolstering heroism can elicit stronger feelings of admiration than bolstering effort. Heroes who accept a significant challenge are even more admirable,

and their feats appear more impressive (Onu et al., 2016). Based on this rationale, we hypothesize:

H2: When the recovery performance is perceived as having had a higher (vs. lower) risk for the employees, bolstering heroism (vs. bolstering effort) has a stronger (weaker) effect on feelings of admiration.

Normalizing heroism

Contextual circumstances might also weaken this effect and reduce the effect of bolstering heroism. Heroes go above and beyond what is normally expected of others in similar positions. We studied two boundary conditions that might reduce the impact of bolstering heroism: the perceived demands that employees routinely face in a given industry and the perception that the organization bolstering its employees' heroism is a good employer.

The literature on human resource management has established that professions vary in the demands they face and that such demands have important effects on employees' well-being and performance outcomes (Akkermans et al., 2013). We reason that customers' perceptions of job demands might play an important role in their responses to bolstering heroism. When a service profession is perceived as very demanding, the portrayal of a single act of heroism might be discounted. This is because high perceived job demands weaken the exceptionality of heroic accounts and lead customers to expect exceptional recovery performance in a given context. In contrast, if perceived job demands are relatively low, an account of heroism would elicit stronger admiration because it would appear more noteworthy. Consequently, we hypothesize:

H3: When perceived job demands are high (low), bolstering heroism (vs. bolstering effort) has a weaker (stronger) effect on feelings of admiration.

Heroism can also be normalized with information suggesting that exceptional employee performance is not internally motivated. In this respect, we consider the relative effect of customers' perceptions that an organization is a good employer. We propose that information suggesting that an organization is a good employer can normalize heroism in two ways. Firstly, being perceived as a good employer can lead customers to attribute exceptional recovery performance to the organization rather than its employees. This could diminish the impression that employees' recovery performance is internally motivated, as the hero stereotype suggests. Secondly, a good employer can reasonably be expected to provide

employees with the resources necessary to succeed. This expectation would weaken the perceived exceptionality of the performance. Normalizing heroes makes them less worthy of social admiration (Onu et al., 2016). Based on this logic, we hypothesize:

H4: When the reputation of the organization as a good employer is stronger (weaker), bolstering heroism (vs. bolstering effort) has a weaker (stronger) effect on feelings of admiration.

Figure 1 below presents the conceptual model tested in this research.
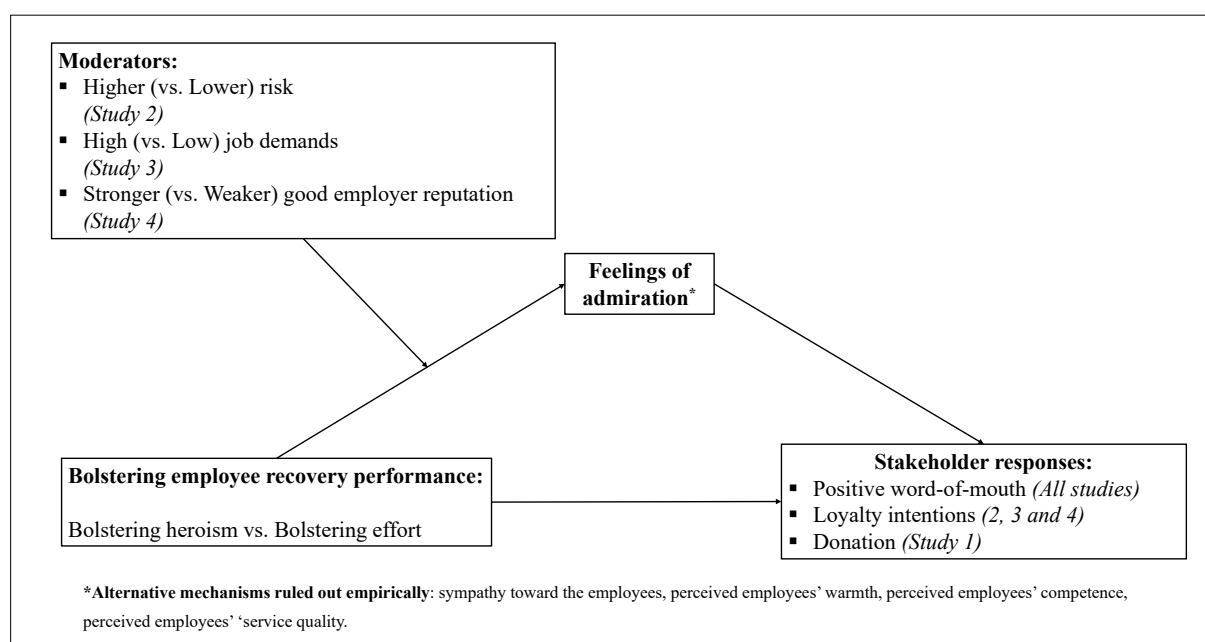
Study 1: The persuasiveness of bolstering heroism after a real crisis

In October 2023, the British Library experienced a cyberattack that significantly affected its digital services. We test our proposed recovery strategy in the context of this crisis, considering whether bolstering employee heroism can increase donations for an affected institution. We recruited 225 Londoners (42% male; mean age 41) on Prolific. We tested two messages focused either on effort or heroism: *"We want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the [hard work/heroism] of our staff. They [kept going in tough conditions/sacrificed personal time] to ensure that our operations could be restored to some degree as soon as possible. Their [efforts/sacrifice] allowed us to minimize the negative impact on users."* A third alternative focused on effort but was longer than the heroism condition and more positive than the effort condition. We presented participants with an abridged version of an article from *The Guardian* that reported on the cyberattack. At the end of the article, we modified the response from the institution to include the relevant

manipulations. We borrowed scales measuring admiration toward employees from the literature (Onu et al., 2016) and intentions to spread positive word of mouth. At the beginning of the survey, participants were informed that they would receive a bonus of £.50 for completing the survey and, later in the survey, they were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to donate part of this bonus to The British Library.

To test H1, we ran a mediation model using PROCESS (model 4; Hayes, 2017). The multi-categorical independent variable was coded 0 (bolstering effort), 1 (bolstering extra effort), or 2 (bolstering heroism). We compared bolstering effort to bolstering heroism and bolstering extra effort to bolstering heroism. Bolstering heroism enhanced feelings of admiration toward the employees compared to both bolstering effort (effect = .83, CI .85 to 1.31) and bolstering extra effort (effect = .69, CI .23 to 1.15). In turn, admiration increased positive word of mouth and the average donation compared to both bolstering effort (positive word of mouth indirect effect = .23, CI .06 to .47; donation indirect effect = 2.57, CI .69 to 5.10) and bolstering extra effort (positive word of mouth indirect effect = .20, CI .04 to .41; donation indirect effect = 2.22, CI .51 to 4.49).

Study 2: The moderation of risk when communicating heroism

To test H2, we conducted a 2 (employees' recovery performance: bolstering effort vs. bolstering heroism) × 2 (risk: higher vs. lower) between-subjects experiment. We recruited 303 U.S. participants (46% male; mean age 44) on Prolific. We used a crisis involving a fictitious airline company (*SkyRider*) that was forced to cancel flights due to adverse weather conditions. Participants imagined receiving a cancellation email for a flight they had reserved. In the email, the airline apologized for the cancellation, explained the causes, and described the role of the employees in handling the crisis. After reading the recovery email, participants answered our questions and provided demographic information. In the higher-risk condition, participants read that *"the ground staff faced risky circumstances with several reporting injuries. Windy and icy conditions also led to hazardous flying conditions.*" In the lower-risk condition, this information was omitted. We used the same manipulations of employees' recovery performance as in Study 1. We used the same scales as in Study 1 and we add loyalty intentions (Bolton and Mattila, 2015). To test H3 we ran a conditional process analysis using PROCESS (model 7; Hayes, 2017) with the same approach applied in our previous studies. The moderator variable was coded 0 (lower risk) or 1 (higher risk information). We considered feelings of admiration toward the employees as our hypothesized mediator. There

was a significant interaction on feelings of admiration (β = .89, CI .16 to 1.61). Higher risk enhanced the effect of bolstering heroism on feelings of admiration (effect = 1.64, CI 1.14 to 2.16) leading to increased loyalty intentions (indirect effect = .28, CI .07 to .54) and positive word of mouth (indirect effect = .26, CI .07 to .49). The effect of bolstering heroism on admiration was significant but weaker when risk was lower (effect = .76, CI .24 to 1.27), and we also found weaker indirect effects on both dependent variables (loyalty intentions indirect effect: .13 CI, .02 to .28, positive word of mouth indirect effect = .12, CI .02 to .26). The index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) was also statistically significant (loyalty intentions = .15, CI .01 to .38; positive word of mouth = .12, CI .01 to .34;).

Study 3: Bolstering heroism and perceived job demands

We tested H4 through a 3 (employees' recovery performance: bolstering effort vs. bolstering extra effort vs. bolstering heroism) × 2 (perceptions of job demands: low vs. high) between-subjects experiment. We recruited 288 U.S. participants (46% male; mean age 45) on Prolific. We tested the effectiveness of bolstering heroism in relation to a crisis involving a fictitious diagnostics laboratory (*VitalityLab Diagnostics*) affected by a cyberattack that caused testing and results delivery delays. As in Study 2, service recovery performance was communicated through emails informing participants of a delay in the delivery of their test results. At the beginning of the survey, participants read a short text manipulating the perception of the job demands of clinical laboratory technicians. In the high-demands condition, the profession was described as "*often exceedingly demanding*". In contrast, in the low job demands condition, the profession was described as "*often not particularly demanding*". After evaluating the job description, participants were presented with an email describing employees' recovery performance. We used the same messages and measures employed in previous studies.

To test H3 we ran a conditional process analysis using PROCESS (model 7; Hayes, 2017) with the same approach applied in previous studies. The moderator variable was coded 0 (low job demands) or 1 (high job demands). There was a significant interaction on feelings of admiration (β = −1.14, CI −1.85 to −.42). When the perception of job demands is low, heroism enhances feelings of admiration (effect = .70, CI .19 to 1.20), increasing loyalty intentions (indirect effect = .17, CI .05 to .36) and positive word of mouth (indirect effect = .13, CI .03 to .29). However, when the perception of job demands is high, the effect of heroism on admiration is not significant (effect = −.44, CI −.95 to .07) and its mediation of increased loyalty intentions and positive word of mouth is not supported (loyalty intentions

indirect effect = −.11 CI, −.28 to .03, positive word of mouth indirect effect = −.08, CI −.22 to .02). The index of moderated mediation further supports the moderation of job demands (loyalty intentions = −.56, CI −.97 to −.20; positive word of mouth = −.50, CI −.87 to −.18).

Study 4: Heroism and good employer reputation

To test H4, we conducted a preregistered 3 (employees' recovery performance: bolstering effort vs. bolstering talent vs. bolstering heroism) × 2 (reputation as a good employer: stronger vs. weaker) between-subjects experiment. In addition to bolstering effort, in this study, we also considered a control focused exclusively on bolstering talent (Leung et al., 2020). We recruited 550 U.S. participants (42% male; mean age 43) on Prolific. We used the same cyberattack crisis involving a fictitious diagnostics laboratory that was used in Study 3. We asked participants to read the email and imagine themselves as customers whose analysis results were delayed. Finally, participants answered our questions and provided demographic information. In the condition of manipulating a stronger reputation as a good employer, participants saw a badge certifying that VitalityLab Diagnostics was the "*best place to work in healthcare in 2023*". This information was not displayed in the weaker reputation condition. The bolstering heroism and bolstering effort conditions were consistent with previous studies. In the bolstering talent condition the relevant text read focused on the talent and skills of the staff. We used the same scales as in previous studies and randomized their presentation.

To test H3, we ran a conditional process analysis using PROCESS (model 7; Hayes, 2017) with the same approach applied in previous studies. The moderator variable was coded 0 (good employer information absent) or 1 (good employer information present). We used PROCESS to calculate comparisons between bolstering extra effort and bolstering heroism and between bolstering talent and bolstering heroism. Given our hypotheses, we considered feelings of admiration as the focal mediator. There was a significant interaction on feelings of admiration toward the employees both in the bolstering effort condition (β = −.86, CI −.1.62 to −.10) and the bolstering talent condition (β = −1.03, CI −1.79 to −.30). Compared to bolstering effort, when good employer information is absent, bolstering heroism enhances feelings of admiration (effect = .78, CI .24 to 1.32), increasing loyalty intentions (indirect effect = .38, CI .17 to .63) and positive word of mouth (indirect effect = .36, CI .11 to .65). These effects were not significant when good employer information was present (admiration effect = −.11, CI −.65 to −.43; loyalty intentions indirect effect = −.001 CI, −.21 to −.19;

positive word of mouth indirect effect = −.05, CI −.33 to −.21). The index of moderated mediation supported the moderation hypothesized (loyalty intentions = -.38, CI −.71 to −.10; positive word of mouth = −.41, CI −.82 to −.05). In the bolstering talent condition, we found consistent results. When good employer information was absent, heroism enhanced feelings of admiration (effect = 1.03, CI .49 to 1.57), increasing loyalty intentions (indirect effect = .46, CI .21 to .75) and positive word of mouth (indirect effect = .47, CI .21 to .76). However, when good employer information was present, the positive effect of heroism on admiration was not significant (effect = −.001, CI −.54 to .53) and loyalty intentions and positive word of mouth were not enhanced (loyalty intentions indirect effect = −.03 CI, −.25 to .19; positive word of mouth indirect effect = −.001, CI −.26 to .23). The index of moderated mediation supported the moderation of the perception of a good employer on both dependent variables (loyalty intentions = −.49, CI −.87 to −.12; positive word of mouth = −.47, CI −.89 to −.11).

General discussion

This study contributes to research on service crisis recovery by demonstrating the effectiveness of bolstering communications that stress the heroism of employees' recovery performance. We consider the effect of ascriptions of heroism that an organization can deliver when communicating about employees' recovery performance. In this respect, we conceptualized and tested a new crisis response strategy to rebuild positive relationships with customers in the aftermath of service crises (Khamitov et al., 2020; Rasoulian et al., 2017). We identified the mechanism that explains the persuasiveness of bolstering heroism and the boundary conditions of its effectiveness. We demonstrate that post-crisis communications praising employees' recovery performance are important because, in addition to pleasing and galvanizing employees, they can positively influence external customers who have been negatively affected by service disruptions. We examine how to craft effective messages that bolster heroism. Accounts of heroism are more effective if they appear genuinely exceptional, internally motivated, and involve significant perceived risk (Franco et al., 2018; Kinsella et al., 2015).

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