

NFL CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL  
APOLOGIA REGARDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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APOLOGIA REGARDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

The NFL is a large corporate organization that has recently had numerous, publicized discrepancies, which have damaged its public reputation. Perhaps the most significant issue that thrust the NFL into crisis communication mode was the countless media reports of domestic violence within the NFL last year, including the Ray Rice incident.

Scandal broke when a video was leaked to TMZ in September showing the Baltimore Ravens player, Ray Rice, physically abusing his fiancé, in an elevator. These images forced the NFL to publicly address the issues of its policies regarding domestic violence and the various reports of domestic violence by its players as well.

The purpose of this study is to examine the approach the NFL took in its communication efforts as they addressed the Ray Rice incident. More specifically, this study will investigate whether the NFL followed the accepted organizational apologia approach to image maintenance and image repair.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Crisis communications and organizational apoloia are methods of approach, which are pertinent in helping an organization repair their reputation after a disaster or situation that went wrong. In the case of the NFL and Ray Rice, image repair was necessary to address the public scrutiny in the aftermath of the numerous reports of domestic violence. In order to address this situation properly and renew the reputation of the organization, NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell had to utilize various elements of crisis communications and organizational apoloia.

To better understand this case study, the background of the NFL must be examined with regard to its domestic violence policies, crisis communications and organizational apoloia. This examination includes the timeline of events regarding the Ray Rice domestic violence case as well. Similarly, a fundamental understanding of crisis communications and organizational apoloia will be presented to provide context for the analysis of the Ray Rice case. A literature review will also add context, as the review will examine case studies similar in approach to the NFL Ray Rice crisis communications case. Finally this case will synthesize crisis communications, organizational apoloia, and similar case studies to examine the approach the NFL took with regard to image repair and image maintenance in this situation.

### **Background on NFL Domestic Violence**

The Ray Rice case was not the first domestic violence case the NFL has had to address. Over the last nine years, law enforcement officials have investigated approximately 50 domestic violence cases committed by NFL players. Among the 50

cases, they have investigated one murder case and several accusations of assaulting pregnant women. (Schrotenboer, 2014)

The results of these investigations varied but most ended with short suspensions of the players involved. “In at least 14 cases, the league or the team suspended or deactivated the players, mostly for just one game.” (Schrotenboer, 2014) In the Ray Rice case, he was the only player in the league indefinitely suspended, but only after TMZ released a surveillance video of Rice assaulting his fiancé in the elevator. (Schrotenboer, 2014) While some players served their suspensions, others had their suspensions overturned and received no consequential actions from the league. Among 16 domestic violence cases, the NFL approved no suspensions, including seven cases in which all accusations were dropped and six cases in which the defendant was given an alternative program to escape suspension or jail time. (Schrotenboer, 2014)

Many of these cases were problematic and difficult for the law enforcement to investigate and determine exactly what happened. “Part of the problem is that these cases historically have been hard to prosecute, making it difficult to punish offenders, either in society or the NFL. Not only is the evidence in such cases often based on he-said, she-said accounts that are hard to verify, but the alleged victims often don't want to cooperate with law enforcement because it could lead to negative consequences for their family and security.” (Schrotenboer, 2014)

**Timeline of Events in Ray Rice case:**

February 15, 2014	Ray Rice assaults fiancé
February 19, 2014	Ray Rice initial video of fiancé being dragged out of elevator released
March 27, 2014	Ray Rice indicted
March 28, 2014	Ray Rice marries fiancé
May 1, 2014	Ray Rice appeals not guilty
May 23, 2014	Ravens and Ray Rice address situation
June 16, 2014	Roger Goodell sits down with Ray Rice
July 24, 2014	Roger Goodell implements two-game suspension
August 1, 2014	Roger Goodell talks to media about incident
August 28, 2014	NFL implements six-game suspension
September 8, 2014	TMZ releases video of Ray Rice punching fiancé in elevator
September 8, 2014	NFL announces unspecified suspension of Ray Rice
September 8, 2014	NFL claims they never saw video
September 10, 2014	Associated Press announces a video of the incident in the elevator was sent to NFL in April

(Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014)

## **Crisis Communications**

Crisis communications is an important element in managing a public relations situation in which a client or organization's reputation is on the line. According to Timothy Coombs, "a crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat." (Coombs, 2007) The crisis can either develop over time if it has not been maintained properly or it can be abrupt and call for immediate action in order to prevent further damage to the organization's reputation. The reputation of an organization relies on the stakeholders and their evaluation of how the organization is operated. (Coombs, 2007) In this situation, stakeholders are defined as anyone who has a vested interest in the NFL including: fans, the public and supporters of the league. Stakeholders can ruin an organizations reputation simply by communicating how they feel about the organizations management of an incident. If an organization loses stakeholder support, they are likely to lose the ability to operate or even survive.

Crisis communications is defined in many ways, but the definition that best applies to the NFL incidents of domestic violence is "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, or industry, as well as publics, products, services or good name. It interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization." (Fearn-Banks, 1996) When the video of Ray Rice beating his fiancé was released, it threatened the NFL organization and disturbed the stakeholders, including the public. The organization as a whole was threatened as their reputation and influence among the public dwindled. The incident caused the public to question the integrity and loyalty of the NFL. (McManus, 2014)

The NFL was on thin ice because “crises threaten to damage reputations because a crisis gives people reasons to think badly of the organization.” (Coombs, 2007) This is exactly what happened with the NFL and Ray Rice. Once the video was released, there was an uproar of comments and concerns about the NFL and their ability to handle these types of situations; ultimately, this tarnished their reputation and caused them to apply various organizational apologia and image repair strategies.

### **Organizational Apologia**

Along with major corporations’ successes, organizations also suffer from crises that require being addressed through communications. These organizations must determine the appropriate approach to address the issue to the public. One of these approaches is organizational apologia. This strategy entails two techniques that are critical to addressing a crisis. The two elements that are included in organizational apologia are image repair and image maintenance. (Rowland & Jerome, 2004) Image maintenance is pertinent to preserving the reputation of an organization through procedural steps. They must show they care for the individual involved, strengthen the ideals of the organization, express that damage was not anticipated for the act, and take precautionary actions to ensure this sort of situation will never happen again. (Rowland & Jerome, 2004)

The Ray Rice case was not initially a suitable example of image maintenance since they waited so long to confront the situation and did not address it as seriously as they should have. This forced them into image repair in order to reduce the scrutiny of their reputation. However, after the incident, the NFL realized image maintenance was

necessary to prevent further incidents such as this domestic violence from occurring.

They did this by implementing a new policy for domestic violence suspensions. (Almasy & Nichols, 2014)

The key to image repair is recognizing a confrontation, and then responding to it correctly and in a timely manner. (Benoit, 1997) An organization must respond to a situation within a certain amount of time to make sure they do not miss the window of opportunity to apologize for the damaging action.

Image maintenance and image repair are essential in organizational apologia and are defining features for restoring or maintaining an organization's reputation. In the Ray Rice case, the NFL attempted image maintenance in February after the first video of Rice's fiancé being dragged out of the elevator was released. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) They implemented the two-game suspension but failed to appease the public's standards of the organization. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) The public expected more from the NFL after this type of an incident and they were outraged by the lack of intensity the NFL gave this situation. (Almasy & Nichols, 2014) The crisis then moved into image repair.

Within image repair, there are many different image restoration strategies. The two strategies that best align with this case are corrective action and mortification. Corrective action involves the organization's guarantee to fix the issue at hand. (Benoit, 1997) This involves dedicating an organization to not only fix the existing issue, but also halt potential cases from occurring. (Benoit, 1997) The NFL used this strategy when the commissioner, Roger Goodell, wrote a letter to the public and all teams outlining the new

policy for domestic violence. (Almasy & Nichols, 2014) While mortification is when an organization is forced to admit their wrongdoings and ask to be pardoned. (Benoit, 1997)

The NFL took a mortification approach when Goodell publicly apologized for the Ray Rice incident through a letter stating that it was his poor judgment (McManus, 2014) as to why they failed to address the situation and take corrective action in a timely fashion. (Benoit, 1997)

**I. LITERATURE REVIEW (you already had a section number I. I don't understand your numbering scheme.)**

**Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication**

Roger Goodell, the commissioner of the NFL, had a major image issue after the video release of the Ray Rice incident. Before the video release: there was no reason to create an opinion on the NFL since they were not considered to be accountable for the incident at the time. (Benoit, 1997) Although the public wondered if the NFL had previously seen the tape and was just looking for a way to cover up the story as it was stated that someone in the NFL had seen the video. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) This is where the tension between the NFL and the public began. These allegations about the video and who had been witness to seeing it already caused turmoil with some football fans and the league they so greatly relied on for their weekend entertainment. Robert Mueller, former FBI, investigated the NFL during this case. The investigation determined there was no proof that the inside colleagues at the NFL received the video before it was publicized on TMZ. According to the report, they also denied allegations of a woman from the NFL leaving a voicemail speaking out about the video on April 9, 2014. (ESPN NFL, 2015)

With the release of the TMZ video in September, of Rice physically assaulting his fiancé, Roger Goodell had no choice but to attempt to restore the image of the NFL through corrective action and mortification strategies. (Benoit, 1997) The Corrective action strategy involves the organization at fault guaranteeing they will fix the problematic situation. (Benoit, 1997) This involves an organization's dedication to not only fix the current situation, but also stop further cases from taking place. (Benoit, 1997) While the mortification tactic states that with this strategy the guilty party must apologize for the action and hope to be forgiven. Since the NFL was delayed with addressing the situation, this was the only strategy that was feasible to properly address the situation. (Benoit, 1997) According to ESPN, "Although the findings supported commissioner Roger Goodell's assertion that the league had not seen the video that shows Rice, the former Baltimore Ravens running back, punching his then-fiancée, Janay Palmer, in an Atlantic City elevator, the Mueller report did say the NFL could have done more to properly investigate the charges." (ESPN NFL, 2015) This directly supports the argument that Roger Goodell did not properly handle the situation, forcing him to publicly apologize and admit his fault in addressing the situation correctly.

The NFL situation with Ray Rice was not the first crisis in a well-known organization. One public individual who encountered a crisis was President Bush, which led his communications advisers to execute crisis communications and organizational apologia strategies. His team had to advocate a crisis communication plan in order to restore the reputation of President Bush and several of the tactics they used were similar to the approach, the NFL had to restore its own image after the Ray Rice case.

## **President Bush's Image Repair Effort on Meet the Press: The Complexities of Defeasibility**

Not only have organizations struggled with crisis communications, but public individuals have encountered these problems as well. George W. Bush and his political group were forced to conduct image repair during the 2004 presidential nomination. "The candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 were united in attacking President George W. Bush. Their continued criticism, combined with news stories about such topics as the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and job losses in the United States, steadily eroded the president's image." (Benoit, 2006) The public was troubled by the news of President Bush's actions. "It is difficult to imagine many events more important than a president justifying the invasion of another country, based on reasons that turn out to be false (and defending a troubled economy), while seeking re-election to the most powerful elective office in the world." (Benoit, 2006)

During the election cycle, President Bush was routinely disparaged and "this president is the Houdini of economics: Three million jobs have disappeared. He's got the worst record since Herbert Hoover." (Benoit, 2006) After Hoover, no one expected another President to follow that same path and create a significant problem within society.

"On February 8, 2004, President Bush appeared on Meet the Press to repair his reputation, exemplifying the problem of how an incumbent president can reply to such attacks while in the midst of a campaign for re-election." (Benoit, 2006)

President Bush was forced to enter image repair after this scandal of weapons in Iraq and job shortages in the United States. (Benoit, 2006) He allowed the media to

become influenced in his life and did what he thought was best for the country without taking the public's reaction into account. This is similar to how the NFL addressed the issue of domestic violence with Ray Rice. They did what they thought was best at the time by implementing the two-game suspension, but shortly realized the punishment was not severe enough as the public was outraged with the NFL two-game decision.

(Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) The NFL had to conduct a public apology through the mortification tactic just like President Bush in order to restore the reputations. (Benoit, 1997)

Along with public individuals, corporate organizations also suffer consequences and have to deal with crises. One of these corporations dealt with a crisis was Sears who had to repair their image after a fraud allegation.

### **Sear's Repair of its Auto Service Image: Image Restoration Discourse in the Corporate Sector**

In the case study regarding Sears image repair was required after being accused of customer fraud in 1992; an investigation was completed in stages in which they discovered different levels of fraud performed by Sears. "Although the percentage of overcharging stores dropped from 89% to 70% and the size of the average unnecessary repair bill had decreased from \$220 to \$100, the problem persisted." (Benoit, 1995) Sears continued to commit fraud despite the investigation. They shortly found that "accusations blamed Sears' management for pressuring its employees to sell parts and services whether needed or not." (Benoit, 1995) This was focused on California stores, but the Department of Consumer Affairs blamed the entire Sears enterprise. The Department of

Consumer Affairs' suspicion was validated when New Jersey stores were found committing the same fraud.

In order to repair this situation, "initially, Sears used spokespersons- primarily Dirk Schenckin, a San Francisco attorney- to present its defense." (Benoit, 1995) After this remedy, they created a full-page advertisement that featured a letter from the Sears Chairman. Sears was effective in communicating their message as the advertisement was seen in 15 different newspapers over the course of two days in June of 1992. In addition to the advertisement, the Chairman used a press conference and made appearances in media outlets in order to restore its reputation. (Benoit, 1995)

The Sear's corporation fraud situation relates to the NFL domestic violence incident in several ways. Both organizations were involved in a significant investigation where their business policies were evaluated. The difference in these two case studies was that the NFL changed their policy to try to please the public and repair their reputation while Sears continued to commit fraud knowing it was illegal. (Benoit, 1995)

Eventually, Sears appointed a spokesperson to repair the situation and speak out about the fraud incident much like Roger Goodell speaking out about Ray Rice's domestic violence. Additionally, Sears created a full-page advertisement featuring a letter from the Chairman. (Benoit, 1995) This remedy was identical to the NFL's image repair strategy as they also wrote a letter apologizing for how the situation was addressed and accepting responsibility for the delay in reaction to this crisis. (McManus, 2014)

## I. ANALYSIS AND IMPLEMENTATION ([why is this I again? Shouldn't it be III?](#))

### Analysis

#### **Organizational Apologia and the NFL**

According to Rowland and Jerome, image repair and image maintenance are two important basic concepts in attempting to mend public opinion. In regards to the Ray Rice incident, Roger Goodell fell short when it came to image maintenance, as he did not address the domestic violence situation until long after the video was released. This forced Goodell to pay more attention to the image repair of the NFL. When dealing with image repair “presenting justification of action or denial of guilt in the particular case” while image maintenance focuses on “maintenance of an overall positive image.” (Rowland & Jerome, 2004) The NFL has had many domestic violence cases, but as stated, many of these cases have gone unseen. Since Roger Goodell had not managed to address the other domestic violence cases within the league, he was forced to enter full-blown image repair with regards to the Ray Rice incident.

When the Ray Rice situation was initially discussed, Roger Goodell determined that “the Baltimore Ravens running back will be suspended for the first two games of the regular season under the NFL's personal conduct policy, per a source informed of the league's plans.” (Sessler, 2014) This was his first attempt at trying to mend the reputation of the organization with the public, and show that the NFL was addressing the situation.

The Ray Rice incident occurred in February and the first video of Rice dragging his fiancé out of the elevator was released to the public four days later. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) Goodell did not address the issue for

months later when he sat down with Ray Rice in June. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) After speaking with Rice, Goodell implemented the two-game suspension trying to minimize the situation and not cause a spectacle for the organization. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) He evidently thought that this suspension would suffice and not ruin the reputation of the organization, and allow them to proceed without repercussions. This was Goodell's attempt at image maintenance. Although these actions were not without consequence as Goodell's decision for the short suspension caused the public outbreak of disappointment and shame, as they did not see that the punishment fit the crime.

Once hearing all the public's complaints with Goodell's punishment, he upped the suspension to six-games for a first offense in August. (Almasy & Nichols, 2014) A few days later the TMZ video showing the severity in the assault as Ray Rice physically punched his girlfriend and knocked her out created more problems for the league and the NFL suspended Ray Rice with no end date in sight. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) Additionally, there was controversy as to whether or not the NFL had the video before TMZ released it. In September, the NFL claimed they never saw the video even though facts prove otherwise. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014) The release of the second video by TMZ was the sole cause for image repair by Goodell. He was confronted with a situation that was not going away as easily as he thought and therefore had to use corrective action and mortification tactics to restore the NFL's image. (Benoit, 1997)

## **Implementation**

### **NFL Apology**

After the devastating situation with Ray Rice attacking his fiancé in the elevator, the NFL had no option but to publicly apologize. Goodell's attempt at image maintenance failed and he was forced to move onto image repair. The first tactic Goodell used to repair the image of the NFL was mortification. (Benoit, 1997) This tactic requires the guilty party to admit they were wrong and ask to be forgiven. (Benoit, 1997) Roger Goodell shortly realized this was his only option and acknowledged he was late addressing the issue. "At times, however, and despite our best efforts, we fall short of our goals," Goodell wrote. "We clearly did so in response to a recent incident of domestic violence. ... My disciplinary decision led the public to question our sincerity, our commitment, and whether we understood the toll that domestic violence inflicts on so many families. I take responsibility both for the decision and for ensuring that our actions in the future properly reflect our values." (McManus, 2014) Roger Goodell publicly admitted that he was wrong. (McManus, 2014)

Roger Goodell wrote a letter outlining the punishment to players if they defy the NFL conduct policy on domestic violence. The letter stated a player "will be subject to a suspension without pay of six games for a first offense." (Patra, 2014) If a player commits a second domestic violence action, it will "result in banishment from the NFL for at least one year." (Patra, 2014) The player at fault "can petition for reinstatement after one year." (Patra, 2014) Although, there is no guarantee they will be reestablished

as a member of the NFL. The situation with Ray Rice was the pivotal point in the change to the Personal Conduct Policy.

### **NFL Changes Policy on Domestic Violence**

After the NFL's apology of the Ray Rice incident, the league continued with image repair through the use of the corrective action tactic. This tactic requires not only fixing the current issue, but also creating a plan for preventing domestic assault cases. (Benoit, 1997) The NFL implemented corrective action by enforcing a new policy regarding domestic violence. "Violations of the Personal Conduct Policy regarding assault, battery, domestic violence or sexual assault that involve physical force will be subject to a suspension without pay of six games for a first offense, with consideration given to mitigating factors, as well as a longer suspension when circumstances warrant." (Almasy & Nichols, 2014) Roger Goodell, Commissioner of the NFL, explains the conditions that would lead to a lengthier postponement: "...incidents that predate a person's time with an NFL team or acts that involve choking, repeated blows or a weapon. They also include violence against a pregnant woman or in view of a child." (Almasy & Nichols, 2014)

Roger Goodell made sure that all players and teams are aware of these changes so there is no confusion moving forward. (Almasy & Nichols, 2014) This means that of the 16 regular season games the player at fault would miss six of those games or 37.5% of the season. (Almasy & Nichols, 2014) It has also been mentioned that "a second incident would be punished by a lifetime ban from the league," which will be implemented in the new policy. (Almasy & Nichols, 2014) Goodell was forced to change the policy as the NFL's reputation was on the line. He used image restoration strategies discussed through

organizational apologia to ensure the NFL would not be ridiculed ongoing about these types of cases. (Benoit, 1997) He used corrective action and mortification, which required him to address the public and assure this type of situation would never occur again and to repair the damage by addressing the situation in front of the public. (Benoit, 1997) Mortification also required that Goodell publicly apologize and address not only his faults, but also the league's mistakes during this time. (Benoit, 1997)

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this study the intent was to show whether Roger Goodell and the NFL followed the organizational apologia of image maintenance and image repair during this crisis situation. These two details are pertinent to reviving and maintaining an organization's reputation. The NFL has had trouble in the past with maintaining their image as numerous cases of domestic violence have occurred. Although these cases were not as public as the Ray Rice case, they still existed and can be found throughout the NFL history on this issue.

Where the NFL failed was maintaining the reputation and not changing the personal conduct policy before the Ray Rice case occurred. Research shows that there was numerous cases previous to the Ray Rice incident, which should have impacted the NFL's approach to its personal conduct policy. Although the NFL did not successfully maintain their image, allowing players to commit acts of violence for far too long. The NFL allowed 50 cases of domestic violence to go under the radar, including one for murder and five for assaulting a pregnant woman. (Schrotenboer, 2014) The Ray Rice case was the pivotal point in which the NFL and especially Roger Goodell, the

commissioner of the NFL, was forced into image repair mode in order to reverse and recover from the damage this scandal caused.

In order to have successfully maintained and repaired the image of the NFL without the drama of the media becoming so involved, Roger Goodell needed to do several things. Goodell needed to address domestic violence when each previous case occurred. This would have allowed him to maintain the image of the NFL instead of allowing the domestic violence cases to go unseen. (Schrotenboer, 2014) If this had happened, it would have created trust between the public and the NFL regarding this issue. Specifically addressing the Ray Rice incident, Roger Goodell needed to be the first one to discuss the issue and how they were handling it instead of allowing the media bring it to the public's attention. Once the first video of Rice dragging his fiancé out of the elevator was released, Goodell should have made a public statement or announcement that there would be repercussions, and that the NFL was investigating the situation. (Timeline of key events in the Ray Rice story - CNN.com, 2014)

Roger Goodell should have enforced a harsher punishment for this kind of assault; especially after the TMZ video inside the elevator came out showing the severity of the assault. Allowing the player to only miss two-games impacted the public's perception negatively, which in return, negatively affected the reputation of the NFL and created additional controversy. This is the reason Goodell had to repair his image through image restoration strategies such as mortification and corrective action. These strategies had different goals, but both applied to the case of Ray Rice. The mortification strategy assured that a public apology was communicated to repair the reputation of the NFL. (Benoit, 1997) In order to administer this strategy, Goodell wrote a letter outlining the

NFL's wrongdoings and apologizing for slipping up and not controlling the situation to the best of their ability. (McManus, 2014) While corrective action included ensuring the public understood how the NFL was managing the issue and to reassure the public that this situation would never happen again. (Benoit, 1997) They guaranteed the stakeholders including the public of this, by implementing the new domestic violence policy enforcing a stricter suspension. (Almasy & Nichols, 2014) These strategies allowed the NFL to begin to repair their reputation with the public. Now, moving forward the NFL need to implement new policies, and monitor the league to guarantee these types of situations do not occur again or get out of hand like the Ray Rice case did.

The intention of this study was to show how the NFL incorporated the organizational apologia: image maintenance and image repair in regards to domestic violence. Additionally, a personal goal as the writer and an avid football fan was to show insight into violence in the NFL with the intention to create an end to domestic violence. Domestic violence has been an issue in the past for the NFL, and hopefully, they will be forced to tighten policies even more in order to completely reduce or eliminate domestic violence.

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