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Cultural Issues in Airline Crisis Communications A Japan–US Comparative Study

Drawing upon Hofstede's (1980, 1991) five dimensions of culture, this study contrasts the organizational responses to two major airline crashes that occurred in 1985 in Japan and the United States. Using a qualitative approach, the study reveals significant cultural differences that affected communications practices by Japan Air Lines and Delta Air Lines. Findings are based upon analysis of 198 US newspaper stories and 196 Japanese newspaper and magazine stories published during the 10 days that followed each disaster. The study reveals significant differences in the use of apology, media strategies, and litigation concerns. The findings suggest that cultural sensitivity is a key to developing a successful crisis communication plan in the airline industry.

Although such disasters are relatively infrequent, airline crashes are highly visible and dramatic events that generate wide media coverage and conjure up disturbing images of agony and sometimes death. People can be affected directly through the loss of loved ones or indirectly through a loss of confidence in an air transportation system upon which they depend.

For an airline, a crash or on-the-ground mishap that results in injury or the loss of life is an operational and management communications nightmare. Such incidents trigger rapid-fire responses by airlines, which have developed elaborate crisis response plans to deal with unexpected incidents.

Implementing an effective crisis response is a daunting task for airlines. Information is often scarce, competitive media demand answers instantaneously, worried or bereaved family and friends must be consoled, and stunned airline employees must cope with an



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array of operational disruptions. Crisis responses are exacerbated for international carriers because incidents often occur in remote locations, sometimes in countries other than their own, where cultural mores differ. Airlines also serve a diverse clientele that does not necessarily share the same languages, beliefs, values, rituals or traditions.

This study examines differences in the crisis response strategies followed by two airlines—one in Japan and one in the United States—in the aftermath of two of the worst airline crashes in history. Both occurred in 1985, the worst single year in history for aviation disasters.

When a Japan Air Lines' Boeing 747 aircraft crashed into steep mountains in Ueno-mura, a small village about 100 miles west of Tokyo, on August 12, 1985, the accident involving Flight 123 took the lives of 520 people on board. JAL was Japan's most trusted airline and continues to be one the world's most respected carriers.

The Japanese crash occurred only 10 days after the crash in Dallas of a Delta Air Lines' Lockheed L-1011 aircraft. Some 136 people were killed aboard Delta Flight 191, which attempted to land at Dallas-Fok Worth (Texas) International Airport during a severe storm (Curtis, 1997).

The two incidents, which occurred only 10 days apart but on opposites sides of the world, provide an insightful contrast into how the companies responded in different ways to quite similar incidents, based on the cultural differences between the nations in which they occurred. Although both airlines were obviously striving for the same goal of obtaining control over and alleviation of the crisis situation, each company followed a different set of protocols that had been thought through to meet the expectations of their own corporate and national cultures.

From these two accidents, it is clear that national culture played a major role in each airline's response to the crisis situation. The question these two incidents raised, however, is *how* national cultures influence crisis communication in fatal airline crashes.

■ Literature review

In today's highly competitive and global business arena, crisis management is critical to an organization's success and survival (Albrecht, 1996; Barton, 1993; Fink, 1986). However, little research on crisis communication has dealt specifically with cultural constraints on crisis responses.

This study drew upon the pioneering work of Marion Pinsdorf (1991a, 1991b), the principal researcher to examine cross-cultural



issues in airline crisis communication. In her 1991 review of six fatal disasters, Pinsdorf offered a two-fold proposition: (1) Disasters dramatically illustrate the ever-present, but normally obscured, cultural variants out of which airlines operate, and (2) Crisis communication, particularly following crashes, must reflect these varying cultural values to be effective and sustain an airline's positive reputation (Pinsdorf, 1991b, p. 37).

Pinsdorf points out that dealing with cultural nuances poses somewhat of a paradox for international carriers, which strive to embrace a uniform identity worldwide. Airlines position themselves as modern, professional organizations with sleek aircraft and confident and competent flight crews. The global character of many airlines is illustrated by the adoption of English as a universal language used by most crews. However, when disasters occur, this uniform identity tears apart. The aftermath of most crises reveals different cultural reactions by victims, survivors, company executives, and countries as a whole (Pinsdorf, 1991b).

■ ***Crisis Management: A creation of Western management communications***

The notions of *crisis* and *crisis management* have received continuing attention in the public relations literature. Webster's defines a crisis as a decisive moment or an "unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending", especially "one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1988, p. 307b).

For the purposes of this study, a crisis is defined as a threat to an organization that reflects the potential of reputational and financial damage, or ultimately the organization's survival (Albrecht, 1996; Allen & Calliouet, 1994; Barton, 1993; Coombs, 1994; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Fink, 1986; Lerbinger, 1997).

Organizational crises can take a variety of forms. One measure of a crisis for an organization is the amount of media attention received, which stimulates concern about the need to protect the reputation of the organization involved (Lerbinger, 1997). An airline crash is an example of such a crisis. High levels of media scrutiny reflect the fact that crises are *social constructions* created in the minds of people whenever the routine operation of an organization is interrupted.

An event such as an airline crash is a *triggering event*, but the *crisis* itself centres on the uncertainty created in the triggering event's



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aftermath. Crisis management entails managing that ensuing uncertainty. Heath (1997) says the objective of crisis management is "to exert control over activities in ways that assure stakeholders and stakeholders that their interests are cared for and fostered by the organization" (p. 292).

Most crisis management activities are organized through crisis response plans that deal with both operational and communications problems. Crisis communication plans are contingency strategies formulated in advance for implementation only following a specified triggering event.

Most crises have been shown to operate over a fairly predictable lifecycle. For example, Fink (1986) has identified four stages in crises: the prodromal, acute, chronic and resolution stages. Most crisis plans focus on the immediate response after a triggering event (the acute stage).

Crisis management theorists have become increasingly sophisticated in suggesting that the nature of crisis responses can vary considerably. Heath (1997) emphasizes that responses should be selected based upon the severity of the crisis. Coombs (1994) contends that different crisis responses are appropriate, depending upon the locus of responsibility for the crisis (internal-external) and the controllability of the cause (intentional-unintentional). Different responses are appropriate, based on whether the crisis involves a faux pas, accident, transgression or terrorism (Coombs, 1994, pp. 7-8).

Providing accurate and timely information about the triggering event, and the organization's response to it, are key elements in most crisis communication plans. Moreover, an underlying concern of many organizations centres upon *impression management*, i.e. how people and organizations act to present themselves in ways that garner the most favourable response from others. Crisis managers strive to limit the potential damage to the reputation and prestige of an organization ("damage control"). The assumption is that organizations can contain the impact of an unexpected disaster. However, chaos theory suggests that such efforts might not be worthwhile. Instead, disasters must run their due course, and situations will return to normal naturally (Murphy, 1996).

Crisis management theory is largely rooted in Western (mostly American) theorizing about management communications. Much public relations theory emphasizes how organizations can manage their external environments through efforts such as press agency, public information, and research-based promotional communications. Such

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approaches predominate management communications today, although normative theorists argue that public relations is ideally practiced as two-way symmetrical communications (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1992).

As a result of its origins in Western thought, little attention has been paid to cross-cultural aspects of crisis communications. Indeed, most of the extant crisis management principles are highly ethnocentric and based on Western cultures. Ethnocentrism means that a single approach to a problem—based on one's culture—is deemed appropriate across all situations and cultures. However, ethnocentric assumptions and theories invariably reflect biases of the society in which those assumptions originate, and might not necessarily be applicable across cultures (Verčič, L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1996).

Ethnocentrism in management communication theory assumes that practices in one country necessarily are suitable or ideal in another. Although many global organizations, particularly international airlines, follow the US principles, this limitation raises the questions of whether or not the US theories, practices, and assumptions are appropriate across cultures (Sturges et al., 1995).

For airlines and other large global organizations, survival has become increasingly dependent upon understanding cultural differences in how people think and act. The responses of airlines need to be more culturally conscious, even though basic response procedures might be quite similar from incident to incident (Pinsdorf, 1987, 1991a, 1991b).

■ *Culture and underlying dimensions*

The concept of culture evolved principally in anthropology until the 1970s, when the importance of cultural differences was recognized by a wide range of research disciplines (Sriramesh, 1996). Anthropologists have viewed culture as a universal construct that promotes people's actions and behaviour in a society (see Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). Culture subsumes (a) beliefs and values, (b) rituals and traditions, and (c) the artifacts that serve as manifestations of those beliefs, values, rituals and traditions (Hallahan, 1997). Naylor (1996) explains:

Culture is a *coherent system* in which ideas are generated out of people's concerns, a set of behaviours is tied to those ideas, and products (physical or social) result from them. These general components of culture are dependent on each other and together produce the coherent whole of culture. (pp. 18–19, emphasis added)



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Dimensions of Culture

Much cultural research involves a "culture-specific approach" in which the focus is to examine how and why people behave within a particular culture. Culture often is synonymous with a particular country, although elements of culture are often shared across nations (Sriramesh, 1996). Comparing cultures requires identifying isolated dimensions upon which cultures can be analyzed (Blumler, McLeod & Rosengren, 1992; Gudykunst & San Antonio, 1993).

Various researchers have suggested underlying principles or dimensions that can be used to examine cultures comparatively. Kluckholm and Strodtbeck (1961, pp 10–20), for example, suggested that cultural values vary on five orientations. These include people's ideas about the character of innate human nature, man's relationship to nature, the temporal focus of human life, the modality or human activities, and people's relationships to others. Trompenaars (1998) drew primarily upon work of early sociologists to suggest five different dimensions: universalism versus particularism (societal versus personal obligation), individualism v. collectivism, neutral versus affective relationships (level of emotion in relationships), specific versus diffuse relationships (degree of involvement), and achievement versus ascription (legitimation of power and status).

This study drew upon a third model for comparing cultures developed by sociologist Geerte Hofstede, who examined the values of employees of a large multinational corporation in more than 50 nations and three regions. Hofstede (1980) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another" (p. 25). Over two decades, Hofstede has demonstrated that differences across cultures can be explained along five dimensions.

Power-distance, or the degree to which members of organizations and society accept an unequal distribution of power. People in cultures with large power distance relationships accept the differences between superiors and subordinates. People do not usually question superiors' judgments, but follow orders. People in cultures with small power distance believe everyone is equal, and do not necessarily take orders without challenge. Based upon quantitative analyses among people in 50 countries and three regions, Hofstede (1980, 1991) reports that Japan ranked 33rd and the United States ranked 38th in terms of high power distance dimension, suggesting that people in Japan are somewhat more likely to be compliant with authority.

Individualism/collectivism, or the comparative priority placed on the individual versus the collective needs in society. In a highly

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individualist society, such as the United States, people are expected to be independent. Personal responsibility is not expected to extend beyond the nuclear family. By contrast, in a highly collectivist culture such as Japan, people value social harmony and expect people to help one another. Such allegiances encourage compliance with organizational goals. Importantly, communication in highly collectivist cultures involves "high context" in which meanings and implications are self-evident, do not need to be stated explicitly and need little explanation. However, communication in highly individualistic cultures often requires information to be stated explicitly (Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1991, p. 60). Unlike the power-distance dimension, Hofstede found sharp differences between the United States (ranked #1) and Japan (ranked #22) in terms of the cultural emphasis on individualism versus collectivism.

Masculinity/femininity involves the traits and behaviours traditionally assigned to men versus women in society. In masculine cultures, such as Japan, people place high value on clearly distinct gender roles, performance and ambition. By contrast, people in feminine cultures emphasize role sharing, quality of life, service and interdependence. Individuals in masculine cultures are more motivated to achieve, place work at the centre of their lives, accept employers' interference in their lives, and accept high job-related stress as a part of life. According to Hofstede (1980), Japan ranks first in masculinity, compared with the United States, which ranks 15th in masculinity, among 50 countries and three regions.

Uncertainty avoidance involves the extent to which one considers ambiguous situations threatening. Societies strong in this dimension emphasize the need for formal rules, encourage compliance, and seek to avoid conflict. High uncertainty avoidance also results in greater stress. Significantly, uncertainty avoidance is not tantamount to *risk* avoidance. Rather, high uncertainty avoidance cultures put a premium on planned and deliberate risk taking. Japan ranked comparatively high (7th place) and the United States ranked comparatively low (43rd place) out of 50 nations and three regions in the propensity to avoid uncertainty.

Confucian dynamism, a fifth dimension added later to Hofstede's original typology, consists of values based on longer-versus shorter-term orientations in life. Individuals in short-term oriented societies want quick results, whereas people in longer-term (more Confucian) cultures persevere and are willing to accept slow results. People in short-term societies put a premium on finding truth, while people in longer-term societies are concerned with the demands of virtue. In



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other words, what is true, or who is right, is not as important as what works best to achieve a common goal. Moreover, Hofstede argues that a non-Confucian orientation tends to promote "concern with 'face'" or reputation, while ignoring the common interests of the society as a whole. Among 23 countries that Hofstede investigated, Japan and the United States ranked 4th and 17th, respectively, in the levels of emphasis on this cultural dimension.¹

As suggested in Hofstede, and generally acknowledged in business literature, clear differences can be expected to be evident when comparing cultures as diverse as Japan and the United States. These differences manifest themselves in different organizational behaviours, management techniques and negotiation/communication styles (Adler, 1986; American Chamber of Commerce in Japan, 1996; Darlington, 1996; Hoecklin, 1995; Genzberger, et al., 1994; Gesteland, 2002; Harris & Moran, 2000, esp. pp. 302-311; Hocklin, 1995; Lewis, 2000, pp. 400-416; Nishiyama, 2000; Schneider, & Barsoux, 2003, Tung, 1996).

■ Research questions and expectations

An aviation disaster thrusts an airline into a wide range of concerns that have subtle and important cultural implications. In formulating specific research questions for this study, six crisis communication elements suggested by Pinsdorf (1991b) were particularly instrumental: (1) assumption of responsibility, (2) CEO/executive involvement, (3) protection of victims' families, (4) content of information disseminated by the organization, (5) media strategies, and (6) considerations about litigation. These six areas of practice were laid against the five dimensions of culture outlined by Hofstede (1980, 1991) to develop some research questions that formed the basis for this investigation.

□ 1. Some cultural researchers criticized Hofstede's earliest efforts for incorporating a Western cultural bias. The later addition of Confucian Dynamism reflected, in part, these concerns (Gudykunst, 1997; Gudykunst & San Antonio, 1993; Hofstede, 1991). Michael Bond developed a model using 40 of Hofstede's items that reveal four dimensions of cultural values (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). Three of the dimensions paralleled Hofstede's conceptualization of power distance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. The Hong Kong-based researchers, however, found no correlation with uncertainty avoidance. Instead, their fourth dimension emphasized long-term versus short-orientations in society. Eventually this became what Hofstede's labeled Confucian Dynamism.



RQ1: To what extent did the airlines assume responsibility for the incidents? Based on Hofstede's (1980, 1991) study, the answers to this question were expected to reflect two of the cultural dimensions: uncertainty avoidance and Confucian dynamism. In a culture with strong uncertainty avoidance such as Japan, people avoid ambiguity. A Japanese company would be expected to claim responsibility, even if the cause of the tragedy were not determined. The strong Confucian dynamism in Japanese society places a priority on virtue, rather than the truth of the matter. Therefore, in the case of the JAL crash, virtue would demand that the company show its shared loss in the form of apology. By contrast, the greater tolerance for ambiguity would make it easier for a US airline to avoid the assumption of responsibility or to avoid making any statement about its culpability. As long as the ambiguity of the situation for a moment leads to the discovery of the truth, there is no need to claim responsibility or offer a public apology, even though the public may still demand prompt actions.

RQ2: How were the CEOs or top executives of the airlines involved in communication activities? The role of the airlines' chief executive officers might be explained based upon at least three of Hofstede's cultural dimensions: power distance, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Although Hofstede (1980) found only moderate levels of power distance for both countries, Japanese society has a larger power distance than found in American culture. Greater power distance would indicate a stronger tendency toward hierarchy and centralization, thus placing the CEO of JAL in a potentially more culturally important role than his American counterpart.

Extremely strong masculinity in the Japanese culture would only reinforce this expectation because male managers are supposed to be assertive, decisive, and in control. Moreover, strong uncertainty avoidance in Japanese society demands decisive leadership in a crisis situation such as an airline crash. Japanese CEOs and top executives are expected to be visible to the public and highly involved. By contrast, the smaller power distance, the less masculinity, and the weaker concerns about uncertainty avoidance in US society would enable American CEOs and top executives to remain less visible and less involved.

RQ3: To what extent did the airlines protect the victims' families from media scrutiny? This question balances cultural perceptions of privacy, people's right to know, and issues related to the freedom of the press in the United States and Japan. Because



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privacy is cherished to some extent in both Japanese and American cultures, it was expected that each of the airlines would be concerned with protection of families. However, the extent might be based on differences on the individualism/collectivism dimension.

In a strong collectivistic culture like Japan, private life tends to be outweighed by interests of groups, and ideologies of quality among group members tend to prevail over individual freedom. In fact, Japanese people generally identify themselves as members of a collective—the Japanese society. By contrast, privacy is much more strongly protected in strong individualist societies, such as the United States, where ideologies of individual freedom prevail over those of equality among group members. This would suggest that American efforts to protect victims' families would be more extensive than in Japan.

RQ4: To what degree was the information from the airlines immediate, accurate, and complete? This question focused on how cultural elements might influence the strategies and tactics of organizations in different cultures, but also how the journalistic practices might moderate those activities. Although both the United States and Japan embrace journalistic principles that place a premium on immediacy, accuracy and completeness, it was expected that differences in the handling of information might be explained by two of Hofstede's five cultural dimensions: uncertainty avoidance and Confucian dynamism.

People in cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance, such as Japan, avoid ambiguity in unfamiliar situations and are reluctant to accept a phrase such as, "I don't know." A person with authority in Japan is expected to have all the answers. Yet, Hofstede (1991) argues that strong uncertainty avoidance does not necessarily call for the truth in Asian societies; instead, people in those societies seek the virtue in whatever situations surround them.

According to the principles of Confucius, "what is true" or "who is right" is less significant than "what works". By contrast, greater acceptance of uncertainty in US society allows individuals to tolerate ambiguity and to be more willing to plead ignorance, particularly if facts are not readily available. People in non-Confucian societies, such as the United States, would emphasize the importance of accuracy, thus justifying taking longer to disseminate information in order to assure accuracy.

RQ5: What were the strategies of the airline in handling media activities? Three dimensions provided a possible basis for investigating the general handling of responses to the crashes: power

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distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. The large power distance found in Japan encourages centralized management systems and vertical communication networks (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). The strong Japanese sense of uncertainty avoidance further demands a clearly distinguished authority. The masculinity/femininity dimension would suggest that any activity as important as the response to an airline disaster ought to be handled by male spokespersons. On the other hand, such predictions would not be expected in the United States, where small power distances and less concern about uncertainty would make the need for a highly centralized, controlled response less necessary. Greater femininity of American culture would also permit females to serve as a company spokesperson.

RQ6: To what extent were the airlines' crisis responses influenced by concern about prospective litigation? A final issue for investigation dealt with the relative importance of litigation concerns in Japan versus the United States. Here differences in collectivism versus individualism played a potentially useful role to understand how litigation is perceived in each culture. The strong collectivist nature of the Japanese culture stresses that it is virtuous for people to agree. In the aftermath of a disaster, restoring harmony is not served by going to court where guilt or innocence is assigned if the result is the creation of disharmony in relationships.²

The Japanese value harmony so much that they prefer to solve disputes by conciliation and compromise (Dean, 1990). Litigation is a course of last resort only if preferred methods fail and the relationship with the other party is no longer worth saving (Waxman, 1988). This is in sharp contrast to the highly litigious nature of American society, which would make concerns about potential litigation a key issue in most airline crisis communication responses.

■ Method

This study involved a case study comparison of the two airline crashes employing a combination of content analysis of media coverage,

□ 2. This traditional antagonism toward law and litigation clearly accounts for the fact that Japan has one of the lowest numbers of court cases and lawyers per capita among all industrialized nations (Dean, 1990). Tokyo University professor Noda (cited in Dean, 1990) offers an explanation for the Japanese people's dislike of court:

To never use the law, or be involved in the law, is the normal hope of honorable people. To take someone to court to guarantee the protection of one's own interests, or to be mentioned in court (either as plaintiffs or defendants), is a shameful thing: and the idea of shame is the keystone to the system of Japanese civilization. In a word, Japanese do not like law. (p. 246)



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supplemented by in-depth interviews (Lindlof, 1994). The cases were selected based upon the senior author's interest in examining crisis communication responses to an airline disaster in Japan. Despite the fact that the JAL crash had occurred 14 years ago, the JAL incident was deemed the most appropriate incident to investigate because of the event's historical significance, the wide coverage it received, and JAL's prominence in the Japanese airline industry. The Delta crash was chosen as a contrasting US incident based on its close proximity in time and its similarity to the JAL incident.

In July 1997, the senior author spent three weeks gathering the data while visiting his native Tokyo. Articles in two national newspapers, *The Asahi Shinbun* and *The Nippon Keizai Shinbun*, were collected at a branch of Tokyo Metropolitan Library in Nakameguro. The collected articles were published during the first 10 days following the JAL crash, August 13–22, 1985. Coverage was also examined in the August 29 and September 5, 1985, issues of a weekly major national newsmagazine, *The Shukan (weekly) Shincho*. In all, 196 newspaper and magazine stories were analyzed.

Two in-depth interviews also were conducted. These were recorded in Japanese and later transcribed into English. H.T. is a current executive in corporate communications at Japan Air Lines headquarters in Tokyo. The interview, which lasted about 60 minutes, took place in a conference room at the airline's headquarters. S.K., a reporter who covered the crash for *The Shukan Shincho*, agreed to be interviewed for approximately 45 minutes at the magazine's publishing headquarters. (Note: Only abbreviations are used to identify the sources, at their request.)

Data related to the Delta crash were collected by examining microfilm of the newspaper coverage found in four major US newspapers: *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (due to their proximity to the incident), *The Atlanta Constitution* (the major newspaper in Delta's headquarters city), and *The New York Times* (the closest equivalent to *The Asahi Shinbun*). In all, 198 newspaper stories were located and analyzed for the 10-day period following the crash, August 2–12, 1985.

In addition to newspaper accounts, a now retired corporate official for Delta (B.B.) responded to a set of prepared questions that were submitted in November 1998. After 14 years, one of the limitations of this study was the inability to locate the other communications professionals who were directly involved in handling JAL's and Delta's responses to these incidents. A spot check revealed that news coverage of both accidents dropped significantly after about 10 days. This

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suggests that all of the major post-disaster coverage is represented in the newspaper articles reviewed.

The interpretation in a qualitative study relies on the investigator's judgments much more than it does in quantitative research. In other words, the investigator is the primary instrument of inquiry in a qualitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lindlof, 1994). As a number of qualitative scholars agree, qualitative inquiry values the study of "situated, emergent, and reflective human phenomena" (Lindlof, 1994, p. 22; see also Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

■ Findings

■ *RQ1. Assumption of responsibility*

Generally, the expectation that uncertainty avoidance and strong Confucian dynamism would lead JAL to assume responsibility for the JAL disaster was supported, while there was no evidence that Delta assumed any responsibility for the US incident.

JAL not only apologized, but did so swiftly. President Yasumoto Takagi publicly assumed responsibility and apologized to the families of the victims only four hours after the jumbo jet crashed (JAL chief apologizes..., 1985, August 13). The airline did not assume human errors on its part (524 victims, 1985, August 13), but Takagi, as the "head of the house" for the airline, apologized repeatedly to both the families and the nation. Newspapers ran pictures of Takagi bowing deeply to the family members of the victims. The JAL executive interviewed explained:

The action taken by president Takagi to publicly apologize just shortly after the accident, even without any knowledge of the exact cause, was strongly expected by the people of Japan. In other words, Japanese people would have been outraged if Takagi had not done it so swiftly. In our culture, an apology doesn't have to come from admission of guilt. Instead, it often means very deep sympathy and sorrow. And it is very important to do that as a member of our society. (H.T., 1997).

The JAL chief executive actually announced his resignation a few days after the crash but vowed to stay until the mitigation effort was substantially completed (Takagi to resign, 1985, August 15; JAL president Takagi, 1985, August 15). His resignation did not come as a



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surprise in the Japanese society, because of the disgrace that the accident caused the corporation and the nation. Later that same year, a JAL senior maintenance technician committed suicide (Yoshioka, 1986), an extreme but understandable act for a Japanese worker who believed he was responsible for the loss of life.

By comparison, at least during the first 10 days following the crash, Delta did not accept any responsibility for the crash. Instead, Delta's spokespersons emphasized "wind shear", a weather phenomenon that was later determined to be the cause, implying that the airline did nothing wrong (Golden, 1985, August 3; Reaves, 1985, August 3).

The airline continued to use this strategy, despite media questions about the competency of the captain who made the decision to land in a severe storm (Fulton, 1985, August 4; Smith, 1985 August 3). One article stated, for example, "It was human error that the plane was landing in the violent storms in the first place" (Grizzard, 1985, August 5; see also Rubin, 1985, August 4).

Delta not only avoided acknowledging the public doubt about the Flight 191 crew, but it also disassociated itself from this allegation by portraying the late captain as one of the best in the industry (Gordon & Nichols, 1985, August 5). "He was experienced and would not have tried to land if he thought he could not have done so safely", said one Delta spokesperson (Dennis & Stewart, 1985, August 4, p. 21A).

Although Delta made no public apology and assumed no blame, the airline's CEO was at the crash site the day after the accident (B.B., 1998). The CEO appeared before media to express sympathy for and extend condolences to the survivors and families of the victims. However, his gesture did not get coverage in the print media. Ironically, efforts by rank-and-file Delta employees were acknowledged (Nichols, 1985, August 4). The Atlanta newspaper praised the quickness and professionalism of the airline during the initial hours of post-crash chaos (Thompson & Thurston, 1985, August 4). In summary, Delta Air Lines acted quickly in response to the crisis, expressed sympathy and sorrow, but stopped short of any apology that might imply culpability.

■ *RQ2. Chief executive officer involvement*

The second question addressed the visibility and public presence of the JAL CEO versus the Delta CEO, possibly based on cultural differences centred on power distance, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Conclusive differences are more difficult to

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discern based on media coverage. Information was scant, at best, especially about the CEO's daily involvement.

JAL president Takagi was visible and available to both the media and the victims' families almost immediately after the crash (JAL chief apologizes, 1985, August 13; 524 victims, 1985, August 13). He was in fact among the very first JAL personnel to directly face the families (JAL chief apologizes, 1985, August 13). Takagi also answered questions from government officials, including the Prime Minister (Top Liberal Democratic Party officials, 1985, August 14). In addition, Takagi and several other top executives personally interacted with the victims' families, including participation in two memorial services arranged by the airline (Yoshioka, 1986).

The head of Japan Air Lines kept a high profile throughout the course of the airline's crisis communication response. Takagi might have been thought to be "hiding" if he had not been as visible and available (H.T., 1997). As the head of the "JAL family", it was inevitable that he would make himself available throughout the aftermath of the accident. The Japanese public expect such behaviour.

Delta Chief Executive Officer David C. Garrett, Jr., visited the crash site the day after the accident, and President Ronald W. Allen appeared before the media in an attempt to explain the airline's effort (B.B., 1998). However, these actions by Delta's CEO and president were not reported in the first 10 days of the media coverage. Otherwise, the CEO and president appeared to keep a low profile. In addition, neither the CEO nor the president personally met with the survivors or the victims' families, even though several high-ranking managers attended the funerals of some of the victims (B.B., 1998; Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Press reports did not provide any information specifically about the Delta CEO's involvement in communication activities on a daily basis, unlike his Japanese counterpart. However, several other top executives did take part in the crisis management effort.

Within about four hours of the crash, a senior vice president of operations and other top Delta officials were on their way from Atlanta to Dallas in order to assess the situation and to assist federal investigators (Thompson & Thurston, 1985, August 4). Moreover, 10 to 12 selected executives formed a "command group" at the airline's headquarters in Atlanta, and several other managers volunteered to help other employees (Adams, 1985, August 4; Thompson & Thurston, 1985, August 4).



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■ **RQ3. Protection of families**

RQ3 focused on how the premium placed on individualism in the United States, versus collectivism in Japan, might have influenced efforts of the airlines to protect families from the glare of media during their time of sorrow.

For the JAL crash, there was no extensive coverage of the airline's efforts to protect families from media scrutiny. However, according to the current JAL official, JAL employees did "their best" to shield victims' families from the media, particularly against "senseless pursuit" by some reporters (H.T., 1997).

Similar to Delta employees, JAL employees followed their human instincts and "common sense as Japanese" to care for the survivors and the victims' families. However, the airline could not make extensive efforts to protect the families because of a strong awareness of "freedom of press" in Japanese society (H.T., 1997).

Also similar to its US counterpart, JAL followed its crisis management plan and assigned one or two employees to each family (Yoshioka, 1986). However, in selecting those who were to assist the families, the Japanese airline followed cultural expectation more than its US counterpart. The assigned JAL employees were all men in their mid-40s to early 50s, because "Japanese people believe older males are better prepared than females or younger males to handle a stressful situation like the aftermath of an airline crash" (H.T., 1997).

The assigned employees did everything—from helping with legal paperwork to arranging meals to running errands wherever needed. Although some of their assigned tasks appeared ridiculous (e.g., some family members asked JAL employees to bring alcoholic beverages late at night), such care was expected as a moral obligation in Japanese society (Yoshioka, 1986).

Delta made special efforts to protect victims' families. Delta employees planned ways to get the relatives of crash victims off arriving flights to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport "without subjecting them to the cameramen, reporters and photographers camped at the gate" (Adams, 1985, August 4, p. 19A).

The public seemed to be impressed with how Delta employees helped the families avoid intense media attention. For example, passengers arriving in Atlanta on the night of the crash saw Delta employees "whisk relatives and friends of those aboard the crashed plane away from the eyes of the public" (Painton & Auchmutey, 1985,

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August 3, p. A1). Some stories suggested that these actions were not out of the airline's crisis plan but of the employees' "human spirit" (Nichols, 1985, August 4). Spokesperson Clint Sweazea was quoted as stating, "To my knowledge, there is no special training. We rely on their (employees') natural human instincts" (Nichols, 1985, August 4, p. 22A).

In addition to protecting the victims' families from the media, the airline assigned at least one Delta employee to each family (Oliver, 1985, August 9). The employees' tasks were to "personally" contact each family and offer both financial and emotional help, and ultimately, do "whatever is necessary". One Delta spokesperson explained that those Delta employees would "stay with the next-of-kin throughout the ordeal" and do "whatever is necessary" for the families (Oliver, 1985, August 9, p. C1). Assigning employees to the survivors and the victims' families has been a key item in the airline's crisis management plan (B.B., 1998).

■ ***RQ4. Immediacy, accuracy and completeness of information***

RQ4 sought to compare how the Japanese and American airlines differed in their handling of disaster information, possibly explained by differences related to uncertainty avoidance and Confucian dynamism.

Without question, JAL was quicker than its US counterpart to release a passenger list; it was posted in newspapers within 10 hours of the crash (524 aboard, 1985, August 13). JAL strove to inform the public as quickly and accurately as possible. However, the Japanese public might have placed more emphasis on immediacy than accuracy or completeness (H.T., 1997). In fact, an initial passenger list distributed by JAL included names of people who were not aboard the doomed aircraft (S.K., 1997). However, the mistake did not become a serious problem. This suggests that the Japanese are more satisfied with immediacy than accuracy, especially in the aftermath of a crisis such as an airline crash.

JAL held at least four news conferences a day in the first week following the crash in an apparent attempt to meet the strong demand for information from the public and from the victims' families to obtain information (H.T., 1997). Although JAL's effort might have been sufficient if it were dealing with the US public, the Japanese public were not satisfied with the airline's effort. In fact, the families



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of the victims often expressed extreme frustration with the airline for being "painfully slow" to provide information (Families express frustration, 1985, August 14; Families reunited, 1985, August 15).

Delta's handling of information, particularly passenger information, first appeared to be slow. In fact, when a list of passengers was demanded several hours after the accident, the airline declined to release it until relatives of the dead had been notified (Relatives, friends, 1985, August 3). It was not until the day after the crash that the passenger list was finally released. However, such a delay is a fairly common practice in the United States.

Overall, the US airline's handling of information was well received by the media and the public for its forthrightness and for its effort to convey accurate information (Tarrant, 1985, August 4). For example, one Delta spokesperson said that the media were "very understanding about the airline's refusal to hand out passenger lists until the next-of-kin had been notified" (Oliver, 1985, August 9, p. C1).

One reporter even said that the airline "hospitably accommodated a deluge of reporters, though politely refusing requests for interviews with company executives" (Thompson & Thurston, 1985, August 4, p. A14). Delta had included a wrong name on the fatality list earlier in the post-crash period, but the airline corrected the mistake quickly, and it never became an issue (Oliver, 1985, August 9).

■ **RQ5. Media relations strategies**

RQ5 focused on how the two airlines, admittedly working in two separate media environments, conducted their respective media relations activities. It was suggested that discrepancies might be explained by differences in power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity.

In contrast to its US counterpart, Japan Air Lines used the director of public relations as its sole spokesperson during the crisis (H.T., 1997; Yoshioka, 1986). It is important to note that this person was a male, but his name was rarely mentioned in the media coverage (e.g., Burning sky, 1985, August 13; JAL arranges, 1985, August 21). The media almost always referred to the airline as a whole or President Takagi (e.g., JAL jumbo crashes, 1985, August 13; Yoshioka, 1986).

JAL set up communication centres in two locations: one at the airline's headquarters in Tokyo, and the other in Fujioka, a small city at the foot of the mountains where the jumbo jet crashed (H.T., 1997;



Yoshioka, 1986). The Tokyo headquarters handled almost all media relations activities, and the Fujioka location was used primarily as an outpost for several hundred JAL employees who were assigned to victims' families (Yoshioka, 1986).

Similar to its US counterpart, the Japanese airline has a crisis plan that is continuously reviewed and revised (H.T., 1997). The JAL official explained that the airline's crisis plan focuses on outlining major procedures, such as establishing communication posts and assigning employees to victims' families. The company's crisis plan was designed with flexibility to accommodate situations based on cultural expectations (H.T., 1997).

The airline held at least four information sessions a day in the first week, and two to three in the following several weeks. In those news conferences, the airline focused on identification of victims, rather than the cause of the crash or any other technical information (S.K., 1997). Interestingly, JAL President Takagi rarely appeared at those news conferences; however, he was appearing before the families of victims, repeatedly apologizing on his company's behalf (JAL chief apologizes, 1985, August 13; Yoshioka, 1986). These appearances regularly garnered coverage.

During the first 10 days of media reporting, Delta Air Lines appeared to use five male spokespersons. All five men appeared before the media on a regular basis (Adams, 1985, August 4; Thompson & Thurston, 1985, August 4). No pattern was discerned as to which spokesperson discussed which topic; the spokespersons talked to the media about a variety of subjects except for technical ones (Oliver, 1985, August 9).

Delta set up two communications centres: one at its headquarters in Atlanta and the other at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, the site of the crash. Similar to JAL and other airlines, Delta has a written crisis communication plan, which is continuously reviewed and improved (B.B., 1998). When the disaster happened, a 35-page, step-by-step programme immediately went into effect (Anderson, 1985, August 4; Oliver, 1985, August 9; Thompson & Thurston, 1985, August 4).

Delta appeared to hold at least one press conference each evening during the first 10 days, supplemented by other interviews involving spokespersons (B.B., 1998). It is important to note that although the five spokespersons were available for comments almost any time, the airline did not allow interviews with its top executives (Thompson & Thurston, 1985, August 4).



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■ RQ6. *Litigation concerns*

The final research question centred on how fears about potential litigation might have influenced the crisis communication responses of the two airlines, based on differences along the individualism-collectivism dimension.

Japan Air Lines was unquestionably aware of the prospect of litigation, given the fact that 520 lives were lost. However, more than 90 per cent of the families ended up settling with the airline without ever going to court (H.T., 1997). For the most part, neither the airline nor the families appeared to be interested in fighting in court, according to a story about the JAL crash that appeared in *The Dallas Morning News* (Swanson, 1985, August 15).

During the first 10 days of news coverage, there was no specific mention of lawsuits by either the survivors or the victims' families. Instead, the media wrote about the airline's liability for the loss of 520 lives and its moral responsibility to care for the families of the dead (Fallen salarymen, 1985, August 17; JAL to give 1.5 million yen, 1985, August 19). Overall, JAL was more concerned about meeting the moral obligations of Japanese society than figuring out how to defend itself in court (H.T., 1997).

Delta was definitely concerned about extensive litigation. In the United States, every major airline crash is inevitably followed by a series of lawsuits seeking millions of dollars in personal damages (Swanson, 1985, August 15). However, the airline came through the crisis with a relatively small number of lawsuits filed against it (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Two factors seemed to help Delta avoid what could have been an overwhelming number of damage lawsuits. First, the cause of the Flight 191 crash was thought to be a weather-related phenomenon, even at the beginning of the investigation. This allowed the airline to portray itself as a victim of misfortune and a violent weather phenomenon (Malone, 1985, August 4; Wright, 1985, August 6). Second, Delta's public relations played a key role in calming a storm of what could have potentially been dozens of lawsuits. Fearn-Banks (1996) offers an explanation:

After the crash, high-ranking Delta employees showed great concern for survivors and families of victims. They sent flowers. They visited. They attended funerals. The company's public relations effort was so impressive that many lawsuits were avoided. (p. 97)



Nevertheless, some lawsuits were filed within the first five days of the crash, and most of them were filed independently by the survivors and the victims' families (Swanson, 1985, August 6).

■ Discussion

This study reveals some significant cultural issues in airline crisis communication, and provides valuable insights for airlines—and other organizations—that operate across cultures. Airlines worldwide, as Pinsdorf (1991b) has pointed out, appear similar to each other because they operate the same kinds of aircraft, crew members dress in similar attire, and most of them use English as the standard language. However, the Delta Air Lines Flight 191 crash and the Japan Air Lines Flight 123 crash revealed cultural differences in crisis responses between the United States and Japan, suggesting the importance of practicing culturally sensitive communication activities during a crisis. Each of the six research questions illustrated different cultural issues involved in airline crisis communication in the two cultures.

The use of apology revealed the greatest contrast between the two airlines. In fact, it appeared to be the most significant difference between the two societies. While JAL President Takagi repeatedly made public apologies to the victims' families and the survivors, neither the CEO nor the president of Delta ever made a public apology. The two top figures of the US airline instead "expressed the company's sympathy" (B.B., 1998). As Heath (1997) and Sugimoto (1997) assert, an apology often carries multiple meanings. However, meanings in an apology such as regret and reparation vary from one culture to another. And this study has shown such a variation.

In the JAL crash case, apology was the centerpiece of the Japanese airline's response to the crisis and, ultimately, was expected by the public. Although Heath (1997) has suggested that an organization may use an apology as a defence that seeks to present itself in a favourable context, JAL's use of apology was rather an obligatory action that presented the company as a morally competent member of Japanese society.

In other words, JAL did not seem to be attempting to defend itself by apologizing; instead, it followed what is perceived to be "right" in Japanese society. In a tragedy like an airline crash, the Japanese people seek multiple meanings in an apology (Yoshioka, 1986). Sugimoto supports this point in that Japanese are more likely than Americans to include the following elements in an apology (Sugimoto,



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1997, p. 365): (a) statements of remorse, (b) reparation, (c) compensation, (d) promises not to repeat the same offense, and (e) requests for forgiveness.

Strong Confucianism in the Japanese culture stress virtue. In this case, virtue was for JAL to offer an apology that included those messages. Moreover, particularly when an organization makes a mistake that disrupts society, the large power distance in Japanese culture also demands that the person at the top of the organization's hierarchy take the most responsibility. In other words, Japanese society wants to see a boss apologize on behalf of his or her subordinates. Therefore, Takagi, as the head of the airline, had to be the one to apologize.

By contrast, in the Delta crash case, the US airline never literally said, "We sincerely apologize for what happened." The Delta CEO and president might have actually felt as sorry and responsible for the crash as the JAL president did for his airline's crash. However, making a public apology was neither desirable because of litigation concerns nor expected by the public.

Indeed, the public did not appear to be demanding an apology from the airline. Although the media reported that the public was dissatisfied with Delta's efforts at times, the American people seemed generally satisfied with how Delta was handling the crisis overall.

Culture also played a clear role in the nature of the leadership exhibited by the chief executive officers of the carriers. From the beginning, JAL President Takagi was highly visible. The Japanese executive was expected to come forward and take responsibility. Reflecting the highly masculine culture in Japan, men are expected to take control of situations. People in a society that tends toward uncertainty avoidance also demand decisive leadership.

Takagi had no choice but to make himself visible in order to show the Japanese public that he was not shirking duty. He did so at considerable personal risk. He exposed himself to public criticisms and scolding that would eventually lead to his resignation—an action that was considered a natural course of action in Japanese society (S.K., 1997). Such an action would be unlikely in Western cultures, unless clear and direct personal culpability could be demonstrated.

The efforts made by both JAL and Delta to protect the families of the crash victims showed that the two societies cared almost equally for the unfortunate. However, the fact that Delta, and particularly its employees, seemed to go further than JAL or its employees in protecting the individual privacy of the victims' families illustrates the strong

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individualism found in the United States. Yet, JAL's action seemed to reflect more deeply seeded cultural expectations than Delta's. The assignment of only middle-aged men reinforced the importance placed on the assignment in a masculine society.

Unlike the US situation, JAL also assigned "long-term" care persons to each family, which reflected both collectivism and the emphasis on Confucian long-term ideals that predominate in that society. Confucian dynamism also emphasizes that it is virtuous for the airline to do everything for the families, and JAL employees willingly subordinated themselves to serve their organization while carrying out these assignments, which involved months of family contact. Their tasks were for the good of their employer and society.

In handling information, Delta seemed to take a different approach than its Japanese counterpart. The difference was likely a reflection of the US culture's weak uncertainty avoidance. One of the characteristics of weak uncertainty avoidance is that people can tolerate a phrase such as "I don't know". It is important to note that this tolerance for ambiguity does not undermine the American public's desire for the truth.

In fact, people in the United States generally have a strong demand for the truth in a situation—a passion not necessarily a part of Confucian cultures. The combination of weak uncertainty avoidance and low Confucianism in the US made the public more tolerant of uncertainty—as long as they would find the truth in time. This gave Delta spokespersons the ability to say, "I don't know", when there was no answer or when the airline could not or would not answer certain questions.

But at the same time, the airline had to ensure that the public would get the truth. This characteristic of US society was clearly reflected by the way Delta handled information. Importantly, the media also accepted the airline's "arm's-length reserve", suggesting that US media practices are as much a product of Western culture as organizational response strategies (Thompson & Thurston, 1985, August 4, p. A14).

The highly centralized control of information employed by JAL, compared to the more decentralized approach by Delta, suggests that the Japanese carrier attempted to preserve hierarchy and control, consistent with the greater power-distance dimension and the greater emphasis on collectivism in Japanese culture.

One subtle but noteworthy difference in the coverage was the Japanese media's reference to either the company or to President



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Takagi. JAL's sole male spokesperson avoided personal identification, always preferring to be anonymous. The fact that the spokesperson's name rarely appeared in the media is an indicator of the extreme collectivism and comparatively strong power distance in Japanese society. He continued to make reference to President Takagi's actions and central role in responding to the crash, which reinforced the public expectation that a responsive organization would place a capable male in such an important role.

The final cultural difference discerned from this study were found in the different strategies used by the airlines to demonstrate their concerns and ultimately resolve any problems involving attribution of blame or reparations. In Japan, the cornerstone of JAL's handling of the crash victims' families involved public apology, whereas Delta's response was less explicit in terms of accepting blame.

Instead of apology, Delta engaged in a series of public demonstrations of concern and sympathy similar to those of its Japanese counterpart: publicly showing great concern for the victims, sending flowers to the families, attending funerals, assigning an employee to each victim's family to assist with short-term problems (Oliver, 1985, August 9).

Although these efforts fell short of apology, consistent with the US beliefs that associate apology with guilt, they were nonetheless effective. Delta's efforts were so impressive that many of the survivor and the victims' families did not bring lawsuits (Fearn-Banks, 1996). Although the exact number of lawsuits filed against Delta could not be determined, Delta officials believe that the number is significantly smaller than it might have been (B.B., 1998).

By exposing cultural differences in airline crisis communication, this study has demonstrated the importance of culture in management communications. As the world becomes more and more interdependent in many ways, the use of culture as a key consideration in management communication planning is inevitable (Banks, 1995; Sriramesh & White, 1999).

This study underscores the potential value of Hofstede's five dimensions of culture as a tool to analyze cross-cultural differences that might exist when planning communications. Issues such as power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientations based on virtue (Confucian dynamism) would appear to be valuable criteria upon which the appropriateness of any particular crisis response strategy or tactic might be assessed.

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