

# Adaptive and Innovative Behavior of Public Relations Officers During the COVID-19 Crisis: Formulating the 5C Model

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the operational stability of businesses across sectors, forcing Public Relations Officers (PROs) to adapt and innovate rapidly to sustain organizational resilience. This study investigates PRO behavior within organizations ranging from micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to national-level institutions, focusing on how communication practitioners navigated crisis-induced uncertainty. Informants were purposively selected PROs who directly managed organizational communication during the pandemic, and data were gathered through in-depth interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022. The urgency of this study lies in the limited empirical documentation of PRO behavioral patterns across organizational scales during COVID-19, despite the pandemic serving as a stress test for crisis communication capacity. Using a postpositivist paradigm and qualitative case study approach, this research employed the Kübler-Ross Change Curve as an analytical indicator to map adaptive and innovative responses. Findings reveal seven behavioral phases: shock, denial, frustration, depression, experiment, innovation decision, and integration; supported by five strategic endeavors: alignment building, communication enhancement, motivation ignition, capability development, and knowledge sharing. The study offers conceptual novelty through the proposed 5C Formula for Adaptation and Innovation, in which changing the paradigm and creating new habits represent adaptive stages. At the same time, creative approaches, channel optimization, and collaborative agreements constitute the innovation stages. This formula contributes an integrative framework for understanding PRO crisis behavior and offers practical guidance for future organizational communication strategies in prolonged disruptive conditions.

**Keywords:** crisis management during the pandemic; innovation; PR adaptation; PR strategy.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was first detected in late 2019 in Wuhan, China. (He et al., 2020), expanded rapidly across the globe and created an unprecedented disruption in health systems, social structures, economic stability, and organizational continuity (Alraouf, 2021). Historically, pandemics have repeatedly destabilized civilizations, from the Plague of Justinian to the Black Death, Cholera outbreaks, and the global influenza pandemics, each leaving long-term trauma and systemic damage (Slamet, 2022). COVID-19 followed this historical pattern, but with a scale and speed of disruption that forced organizations of all sizes to restructure their operations. Many implemented work-from-home policies, whereas others faced furloughs and permanent closures. These conditions underscored a critical question for organizational survival: how effectively can members adapt and innovate in the face of a prolonged crisis?

In crises, communication becomes a determining factor of resilience. Although organizations commonly assign crisis communication to formal public relations units, the reality of pandemic disruption required every organizational member to serve as a Public Relations Officer (PRO) in the sense Cutlip articulated. Broom & Sha (2013) Public relations is not merely a formal division, but a method of communication enacted by all individuals who interact with internal and external stakeholders. From front-line service staff to middle managers and top executives, all members became responsible for maintaining trust, stability, and connection with diverse publics amid uncertainty. This expanded role positioned PROs, formal or informal, as a critical frontline in sustaining organizational legitimacy during COVID-19.

Several cases during the pandemic illustrate how PRO behavior became decisive in determining organizational continuity. MSMEs were forced to renegotiate supply chains, reassure customers through digital channels, and reposition products to remain relevant. National-level institutions confronted public pressure, rapid policy changes, and the need to coordinate large communication networks. Across these contexts, PROs encountered emotional and operational turbulence: shock, denial, frustration, and fatigue, followed by experimentation and innovation. Yet empirical documentation of how PROs personally navigated these phases remains limited. Existing crisis communication studies during COVID-19 focus primarily on organizational strategies, media relations, and public responses, but rarely on the lived experiences and behavioral processes of PROs across different organizational scales.

This gap is substantial, as understanding PRO behavioral dynamics provides insight into how organizations can build adaptive communication cultures for future crises. Furthermore, studies rarely integrate psychological change models, such as the Kübler-Ross Change Curve, into crisis communication research, despite their relevance for describing emotional and cognitive transitions during prolonged disruption. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how PROs in both MSMEs and national-level organizations thought, felt, and acted during the pandemic, and how they formulated adaptation and innovation strategies under extreme uncertainty.

Purposively selected informants represent organizational members who performed PRO roles during COVID-19, regardless of formal position or hierarchical level. Their narratives offer a grounded understanding of crisis response at the level of individual communicators. Through qualitative case study analysis, this research aims to: (1) identify PRO behavioral patterns in navigating the crisis, (2) describe the adaptation and innovation strategies enacted by PROs, and (3) formulate a conceptual model of PRO adaptation and innovation during the pandemic.

The study's main contribution is the development of the 5C Formula, an integrative framework derived from empirical behavioral mapping. Two components, change the paradigm and create new habits, represent the adaptive process necessary to withstand crisis turbulence. At the same time, creative approaches, channel optimization, and collaborative agreements form the innovation process that enables organizations to regain stability and competitiveness. This conceptual contribution offers both theoretical advancement in crisis communication studies and practical guidance for organizations preparing for future disruptions.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Crises fundamentally alter how organizations maintain stability, communicate with stakeholders, and preserve operational resilience. Crisis communication scholarship emphasizes that effective responses depend on the organization's ability to provide timely, consistent, and empathetic information during periods of uncertainty. This perspective aligns with the view of Broom & Sha (2013), who argue that public relations is not merely a structural unit but a communicative function enacted by every individual who interacts with internal and external publics. In this sense, all organizational members act as Public Relations Officers (PROs), particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when the responsibility to sustain trust, manage information, and represent the organization becomes widely distributed across roles and levels.

The pandemic revealed how PROs, both formal and informal, were required to navigate emotional instability, heightened work demands, and rapidly changing expectations. Adaptation became indispensable as PROs confronted disruptions that required them to rethink assumptions, reorganize routines, and establish new psychological readiness. Literature on organizational adaptation highlights these processes as key mechanisms through which individuals maintain functionality in unstable environments. For PROs, adaptation involved shifting their communication mindset, renegotiating work practices under remote or hybrid conditions, and learning to respond to unprecedented levels of public anxiety and information fluctuation.

Beyond adaptation, innovation emerged as a critical element that allowed organizations to withstand prolonged disruption. Innovation during crises is often necessity-driven, requiring individuals to devise new communication strategies, experiment with digital platforms, redesign stakeholder engagement, and build collaborative networks that did not previously exist. Crisis-driven innovation literature emphasizes that external pressure accelerates creative problem-solving and encourages organizations to adopt alternative communication methods. For PROs, this meant leveraging digital channels, crafting persuasive and reassuring narratives, and identifying collaborative opportunities that could support organizational continuity.

To understand how PROs transition from emotional turbulence to adaptive and innovative behaviors, the Kübler-Ross Change Curve provides a relevant analytical lens. Developed initially to describe emotional processes associated with grief, the model has been widely adopted to analyze individual reactions to major

disruptions. Stages such as shock, denial, frustration, and depression capture the early emotional resistance evident during the initial phase of the pandemic. Subsequent stages, experimentation, decision, and integration, describe the gradual cognitive recovery that enables individuals to explore new strategies and stabilize innovative practices. In the context of the pandemic, these stages illuminate how PROs processed uncertainty, managed psychological strain, and eventually constructed new communication patterns.

Integrating crisis communication theory, adaptation, innovation, and the Kübler-Ross model offers a holistic view of PRO behavioral dynamics during COVID-19. Emotional volatility influences how PROs interpret threats, make decisions, and communicate with their public. Adaptation enables them to reframe the crisis, establish new routines, and regain functional stability. Innovation builds on this stability, allowing PROs to design creative solutions, optimize communication channels, and cultivate collaborative partnerships. These theoretical foundations operate not as isolated constructs but as interconnected dimensions that explain the progression from emotional disruption to strategic action.

From this integrated framework, the present study offers a conceptual contribution by formulating the 5C Formula, which synthesizes the adaptive and innovative processes PROs enacted during the pandemic. The first two components, change the paradigm and create new habits, represent the adaptive dimension in which PROs reconstruct their cognitive frames and develop routines suited to crisis conditions. The final three components, creative approaches, channel optimization, and collaborative agreements, reflect the innovation dimension that enables PROs to enhance communication effectiveness through creativity, digital platform maximization, and strategic partnerships. The 5C Formula thus provides a comprehensive behavioral model that integrates psychological change, communicative strategy, and organizational resilience, offering both theoretical enrichment and practical guidance for future crisis communication contexts.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a postpositivist paradigm, which acknowledges the existence of an objective reality while recognizing that it can only be approximated through systematic inquiry (Febriani et al., 2023; Kankam, 2019). The research adopted a type-2 case study design, emphasizing in-depth exploration of individual experiences across multiple organizational contexts. Oktyarini & Mulyana (2022), and was situated within an exploratory qualitative approach that enables the inductive construction of concepts from field data (Kuntardjo & Sebong, 2020; Purwanto et al., 2020). Data collection combined observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews with five informants who served as Public Relations Officers (PROs) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Informants were selected purposively based on their demonstrated ability to sustain organizational communication performance throughout the crisis. They represented five organizations from different scales: two small enterprises, two medium-scale companies, and one national-level institution, as suggested by organizational categorization studies in Indonesia (Hanifah et al., 2019; Siagian & Cahyono, 2021). To maintain anonymity, each informant was assigned a code: R1-SK and R2-SK for small-scale organizations, R3-SM and R4-SM for medium-scale organizations, and R5-SN for the national-level institution.

Interviews were conducted between May and October 2022, allowing informants to reflect on their experiences during the pandemic's most intense stages. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and was conducted online due to mobility restrictions. Field observations were performed concurrently to understand contextual conditions in each organization. However, the study intentionally does not disclose detailed organizational identities to maintain focus on the behavioral dimension of PROs rather than organizational classification. The Kübler-Ross Change Curve Model (Chavan & Bhattacharya, 2022; Hall, 2015; Hillebrand, 2019; Simpson, 2022). Guided the development of interview questions, particularly in exploring emotional transitions, behavioral adjustments, and phases of experimentation and integration experienced by the PROs.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic procedure. Interview transcripts were first subjected to open coding to identify meaningful units related to emotional responses, adaptation practices, and innovation strategies. These codes were then grouped into higher-order categories and mapped against the stages of the Kübler-Ross Change Curve. Through constant comparative analysis, emergent categories were synthesized to formulate a coherent model of PRO adaptation and innovation during the pandemic. Throughout the analytic process, the researcher maintained reflexivity to minimize interpretive bias.

Validity of the findings was strengthened through methodological triangulation, incorporating interview data, observational notes, and researcher memos. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which preliminary interpretations were shared with informants to ensure accuracy and resonance with their lived experiences. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail documenting the coding process, analytic decisions, and interpretive shifts. Confirmability was supported by cross-referencing emerging

categories with theoretical constructions from the literature on crisis communication, organizational adaptation, and innovation. These procedures collectively enhanced the reliability and trustworthiness of the study's findings and supported the development of the 5C Formula as an empirically grounded conceptual model.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Result

The findings of this study reveal that the COVID-19 crisis triggered a dramatic intensification of information flows within all five participating organizations. Informants consistently described the early stage of the pandemic as a period of communicative turbulence, in which internal coordination became unstable and external messages were emotionally charged and often contested (Ritchie & Jiang, 2021; L. T. Tam et al., 2021). As the primary liaison between the organization and its publics, PROs reported that they were forced to manage uncertainties arising both internally, from employees concerned about health and job security, and externally, from customers, partners, and other stakeholders.

Across all cases, PROs exhibited behavioral patterns that aligned with intensified crisis escalation. Informants described initial reactions of shock, confusion, and denial as they confronted rapidly shifting regulations, contradictory information, and organizational disruption. These emotional states shaped early communication behavior: messages were drafted cautiously, approval procedures became longer, and PROs engaged in repeated revisions to avoid miscommunication. Such instability mirrors patterns noted in crisis management scholarship, where sudden surges in information pressure destabilize existing communication routines (Oplatka, 2023; Vardiansyah, 2021; Vašíčková, 2020).

As the crisis unfolded, PROs gradually transitioned from reactive adjustment to deliberate communicative action. The data reveal a strong sense of personal responsibility among informants to clarify information, maintain composure, and translate policy changes for their organizations. Regardless of organizational size, PROs were required to interpret government regulations, synthesize feedback from worried employees, and communicate strategic decisions while balancing emotional strain. This expanded role underscores the argument that crises transform communication practitioners into central actors of organizational resilience.

At the adaptation stage, PROs began reorganizing communication workflows and developing new habits to stabilize their work. Informants described adjustments such as shifting coordination to digital platforms, compressing message approval chains, and conducting more frequent internal briefings. These adjustments reflect adaptive mechanisms commonly observed in crisis management contexts, in which organizations reorganize internal communication to restore equilibrium (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Vardiansyah, 2021). Informants also explained that adaptation required a cognitive shift, revising assumptions about crisis duration, redefining personal roles, and accepting continuous uncertainty as part of their work.

Following the establishment of basic adaptive routines, PROs moved toward innovation. Informants across all organizational scales described experimenting with new digital channels, redesigning message formats to be more supportive and empathetic, and developing creative narrative approaches to maintain engagement. Medium-scale organizations and national institutions integrated data visualization and real-time updates. At the same time, small-scale enterprises used personalized communication and digital storytelling to maintain customer trust amid declining economic activity. These innovations align with crisis-induced creativity described in the existing literature, in which practitioners adopt unconventional approaches under pressure (Fischer et al., 2016; T. Tam et al., 2021).

The results further indicate that innovation became effective when PROs combined experimentation with ongoing evaluation. Informants reported assessing audience responses, refining digital channels, and sharing knowledge informally with colleagues and external partners. Through this iterative process, PROs developed practices that helped stabilize communication performance and support organizational continuity. Their experiences demonstrate that innovation during crises is not a singular act but a sustained cycle of learning and adjustment.

Overall, the results illustrate that PRO behavior during the pandemic progressed from emotional disruption to adaptive stabilization and ultimately to strategic innovation. This progression was observed across small, medium, and national organizations, although the rate of transition varied according to resource availability, leadership responsiveness, and individual resilience. These findings provide empirical grounding for the adaptation and innovation framework developed in this study.

## 4.2 Discussion

### 4.2.1 Reactive or Proactive?

The question of whether PROs should adopt a reactive or proactive orientation during a crisis emerged as a central issue in this study. When the five PROs were asked whether it is more effective to respond reactively after problems arise or to anticipate challenges proactively before they appear, they offered a balanced perspective. Although each informant acknowledged that circumstances may influence the preferred orientation, most emphasized that proactive behavior provides a more apparent strategic advantage in prolonged uncertainty. This view aligns with earlier studies that argue proactive communication reduces risk escalation and strengthens crisis preparedness (Jepkorir, 2021; Santoso et al., 2021). In this context, proactivity becomes not only an individual preference but a strategic position that improves organizational resilience.

The discussion became more complex when the PROs were asked whether, during shrinking market share, increasing competition, and heightened threats to organizational survival, they should adopt defensive or offensive communication strategies. Several informants expressed hesitation, indicating that the choice is not always intuitive. Their uncertainty reflects the dilemma frequently noted in crisis communication literature, in which the decision to preserve existing positions or to advance assertive initiatives requires careful consideration of public sentiment, risk levels, and internal capabilities (Rost et al., 2016). For small and medium enterprises with limited resources, offensive strategies often felt difficult to pursue, while national-level organizations faced pressure to act assertively to maintain stakeholder confidence.

These responses highlight that PRO decision-making cannot be separated from the broader organizational environment. The findings suggest that PROs do not choose defensive or offensive strategies in isolation, but rather evaluate organizational readiness, leadership expectations, audience reactions, and the emotional landscape within the institution. Understanding these dynamics requires further engagement with prior empirical research, especially quantitative studies examining how proactive communication influences competitiveness and crisis outcomes. Integrating these insights enriches the interpretation of the behavioral patterns identified in this study and provides a deeper explanation of the strategic dilemmas PROs experienced during the pandemic.

### 4.2.2 Defensive or Offensive?

Deloitte (2019) The question of whether organizations should adopt defensive or offensive strategies during a crisis becomes highly relevant when considering competitive pressure and shrinking market opportunities. Deloitte's findings provide a valuable foundation for interpreting the PROs' responses in this study. In its 2019 global survey of C-level executives, including CEOs, COOs, CFOs, and CPROs, two-thirds of respondents preferred protective strategies when competition intensified, while only one-third chose disruption-oriented approaches.

This tendency toward protectionism was echoed in the reflections of R2-SK and R4-SM, who stated that their organizations deliberately chose to protect existing assets rather than pursue aggressive initiatives. The pattern observed in the Deloitte study remained consistent when reassessed in 2020, even after executives were provided with more nuanced strategic categories. The findings again showed that 56 percent favored protective strategies, while 26 percent selected disruptive ones, maintaining the approximate ratio of two to one (Deloitte, 2020). These results indicate a general preference among organizational actors to safeguard what they already possess, reflecting the human inclination to avoid loss rather than to take risks in search of uncertain gains.

However, the literature offers a contrasting view, emphasizing that innovation-oriented organizations tend to assume leadership positions within their industries. Studies show that organizations that prioritize innovation often become market leaders rather than followers (Alblooshi et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2013; Mokhber et al., 2018). Further, I argue that leaders derive greater strategic value than organizations that rely heavily on defensive strategies. Research also demonstrates that firms that pursue innovation and controlled disruption enjoy greater long-term advantages compared to those that focus solely on protecting existing systems (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014). They enjoy a higher value than those who implement defensive strategies and do not innovate (Kent, 2015; Smink et al., 2015). These findings suggest that innovation provides measurable added value, especially when organizations navigate turbulent conditions.

In the specific context of this study, which focuses on the pandemic crisis, identifying the most suitable strategy becomes complex. The interviews reveal that organizations face diverse realities and constraints, making a singular recommendation difficult. Each PRO emphasized that the decision depends on the stability

of the environment, the organization's internal readiness, and the predictability of external factors. To reduce the risk of relying solely on intuition, a systematic evaluation becomes necessary. In this regard, a comprehensive SWOT Analysis is recommended to determine whether organizational conditions favor a defensive or an offensive stance (Hergüner, 2021; Stoller, 2021).

The findings further suggest that defensive strategies may be sufficient when market conditions are predictable and relatively stable. In such environments, demand remains steady, and audience behavior does not shift significantly. Prior research supports the notion that organizations can maintain growth while preventing competitors from capturing their customer base when operating in stable environments (Anani-Bossman & Obeng, 2022; Lahav, 2014). Similarly, show that organizations can successfully sustain operations by consolidating existing strengths during periods of uncertainty (Bourveau & Schoenfeld, 2017; Hull & Qiao, 2017).

The situation changes when external preferences shift rapidly, new technologies emerge, and new players disrupt existing market structures. When organizations face volatility and cannot rely on established routines, defensive strategies become less effective. In such circumstances, most PROs in this study suggested that acting offensively becomes a more viable option, as organizations may not be able to preserve unstable advantages or protect systems that no longer align with emerging realities (Fonti et al., 2017; Williams & Tobbell, 2017). Offensive strategies in this context include deliberate adaptation and sustained innovation, particularly through the development of modern PR strategies that leverage Industry 4.0 technologies (Aflaha & Suhara, 2020; Poszytek, 2021; Zhou et al., 2015) These initiatives are further strengthened when integrated with the principles of Society 5.0, which emphasize human-centered technological solutions (Dewi, 2021; Ernawati, 2021; Nursyamsu et al., 2022).

#### 4.2.3 Survival of the Fittest?

The fact that some organizations were able not only to survive the pandemic but also to grow stronger raises an essential question: what distinguishes resilient performers from those that struggled through prolonged uncertainty? This contrast invites deeper inquiry into what enables specific organizations to innovate and adapt successfully during a global crisis. To understand these differences, the Kübler-Ross Change Curve provides a useful analytical lens, particularly because it served as the primary indicator and data-collection guideline in this study (Corr, 2020; Jaskara & Permana, 2022; Wright, 2016). First introduced in 1969, the Kübler-Ross model posits that human cognitive and emotional processes follow recognizable patterns when confronted with significant changes. Over time, the model has been applied in broader organizational contexts and compared with other change frameworks, as illustrated by studies from Stuart (1995), Freeman (1999), Zell (2003), and Elrod and Tippett (2002). The version referenced in Santrock (2007) identifies seven phases that individuals typically experience, along with five efforts that support successful change. The seven phases include Shock, Denial, Frustration, Depression, Experiment, Decision of Innovation, and Integration. The five efforts consist of creating alignment, optimizing communication, sparking motivation, developing capability, and sharing knowledge. These phases and efforts guided the design of the interview and observation instruments used in this research.

The integration of the Kübler-Ross model into this study's analysis allows for a structured interpretation of how PROs navigated the crisis. The findings indicate that the informants experienced all seven phases in varying intensities as they moved from the initial disruption of the pandemic toward eventual stabilization and growth. The Shock and Denial phases were marked by confusion, emotional strain, and hesitation, reflecting the abrupt nature of the pandemic's impact. Frustration and Depression emerged as PROs confronted operational breakdowns, communication bottlenecks, and concerns about organizational viability. As they entered the Experiment phase, PROs began testing new approaches, exploring digital communication channels, and reorganizing internal workflows. The Decision of Innovation phase became evident when PROs committed to specific communication strategies and collaborative practices that addressed the challenges of remote work, fluctuating policies, and shifting audience expectations. The Integration phase was reached when these strategies became stable routines that improved organizational resilience.

The five efforts associated with successful change also consistently appeared in the informants' behavior. Alignment was achieved as PROs synchronized messages and coordinated with leadership teams. Communication optimization occurred as they refined message clarity, frequency, and emotional tone. Motivation was sparked through shared commitment to organizational survival, while capability development emerged through rapid learning of digital tools and crisis management practices. Knowledge sharing became a critical element within organizations and across practitioner networks, where strategies for navigating the crisis were exchanged.

#### 4.2.4 Adaptation and Innovation: The Kübler-Ross Curve of Change

The findings confirm that the seven phases and five change efforts described in the Kübler-Ross framework correspond closely with the lived experiences of the PROs who participated in this study. Data collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews reveal that the informants progressed through these phases as part of their collective effort to help their organizations overcome the pandemic crisis and eventually achieve better performance than before. Their progression through shock, emotional instability, experimentation, and committed innovation illustrates that adaptation and innovation were not linear processes, but dynamic responses shaped by both personal resilience and organizational context. The complete alignment of the empirical data with the Kübler-Ross stages further supports the suitability of this model for understanding behavioral transformations among communication practitioners during large-scale crises. The progression of the seven phases described in the Kübler-Ross Change Curve became clearly visible in the narratives of the PROs who participated in this study. The first phase, shock, emerged as the initial emotional response when informants realized the magnitude of the pandemic's impact on the business environment. Several recalled how sudden reports of death, lockdown policies, and widespread business closures created a sense of disbelief. One informant, DK from R4-SM, stated that the rising death toll made him question whether the organization would survive. The abrupt disruption of regular routines created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, destabilizing internal communication processes.

The second phase, denial, appeared when informants attempted to minimize the severity of the situation. RV from R1-SK admitted that he initially believed the crisis would be short-lived. MW from R3-SM echoed this sentiment, expressing disbelief that suppliers who had operated normally the day before had permanently closed. This stage served as a psychological defense mechanism, allowing PROs to momentarily reduce distress by convincing themselves that conditions would soon return to normal. Their accounts show that denial was not rooted in ignorance but in an effort to cope with overwhelming change.

The third phase, frustration, developed once the reality of the crisis became unavoidable. Informants described growing emotional strain as operational problems intensified. NE from R2-SK mentioned that cash flow became increasingly chaotic, while YM from R5-SN expressed profound emotional fatigue and a sense of helplessness. At this stage, PROs began confronting the collapse of established communication routines, diminishing stakeholder engagement, and uncertainty regarding organizational stability. Their frustration reflected the cumulative pressure created by prolonged disruption.

Depression marked the fourth phase, characterized by a sharp decline in motivation and energy. YM from R5-SN recalled the moment he realized that the situation was far from temporary, stating that it became difficult to continue normal activities. DK from R4-SM described losing his spirit and motivation, while NE from R2-SK admitted experiencing a complete drop in emotional energy. This phase represented an emotional low point in which PROs felt unable to sustain their previous level of performance. Their accounts reflect the psychological toll of carrying communication responsibilities during an extended crisis.

The fifth phase, experimentation, began when informants started seeking new ways to cope with the crisis. During this stage, PROs showed early signs of adaptation by exploring alternative communication strategies and assessing the potential of digital technologies. MW from R3-SM recalled asking colleagues whether an entirely IT-based communication approach could be implemented within his organization. NE from R2-SK sought advice on maintaining customer engagement using online platforms. Their experimentation marked a shift from emotional paralysis to active problem solving.

The sixth phase, the decision of innovation, emerged when PROs committed to new strategies after evaluating the results of their earlier experiments. Informants described recognizing more effective and efficient ways to execute PR activities under crisis conditions. NE from R2-SK stated that they discovered better methods to improve creativity in communication, while DK from R4-SM emphasized finding new approaches that surpassed pre-pandemic strategies. This phase marked a cognitive and strategic turning point, as PROs embraced innovation as a deliberate organizational direction.

Integration, the seventh and final phase, occurred when PROs fully incorporated these innovations into their daily work and communication systems. Informants described this stage as a moment of renewal in which they felt more capable and confident as communication practitioners. RV from R1-SK expressed gratitude that the organization had successfully navigated the crisis and emerged stronger. Integration reflected the point at which adaptation and innovation were no longer temporary responses but had become stable components of the organization's communication culture.

The question that follows is how these PROs progressed through all seven phases while others remained trapped in earlier stages. Some successfully transitioned from shock and denial to experimentation and

integration, while others struggled to move beyond frustration and depression. Understanding the mechanisms that facilitated or hindered this progression requires further categorization of the data using the Kübler-Ross Change Curve. This analytical step helps explain how specific PROs created, innovated, and implemented reliable communication strategies that enabled their organizations to withstand the pressures of the pandemic.

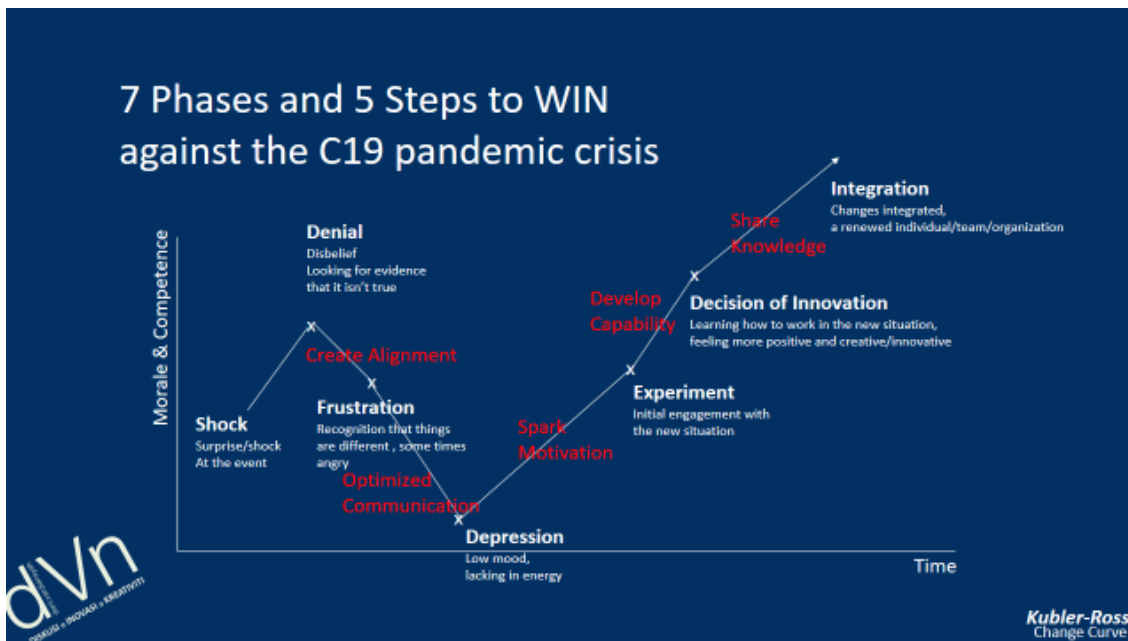


Figure 1. 5 Stages Through the Pandemic Crisis, Adaptation of the Kübler-Ross (2014), processed results from researchers

#### 4.2.5 Five Efforts to Overcome the Crisis

The findings of this study show that once PROs recognized they were situated during a crisis, they moved collectively through the early emotional stages by relying on team cohesion. During the transition from shock to denial, the first effort described in the Kübler-Ross framework, creating alignment, became essential. Informants explained how alignment was established by encouraging the team to acknowledge the reality of the pandemic. NE from R2-SK recalled urging his colleagues to align their perceptions regarding the conditions they were facing. HW from R3-SM added that joint SWOT analysis sessions were conducted to ensure that every team member understood the organization’s position and constraints. This shared understanding enabled the PROs to move more steadily toward subsequent stages of change.

As they shifted into the frustration phase, informants acknowledged that the situation remained uncomfortable. YM from R5-SN reported ongoing emotional strain, while DK from R4-SM noted that although progress had been made, significant challenges remained. Team interactions were disrupted because communication that once occurred spontaneously in shared physical spaces now had to happen through digital platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp. MW from R3-SM shared that spontaneous brainstorming sessions and problem-solving, once done easily in person, had become more difficult. RV from R1-SK echoed the same concern regarding customer service interactions that no longer resembled pre-pandemic practices. These observations illustrate how PROs began to accept that the crisis had fundamentally altered their work routines.

The movement toward acceptance facilitated the second step in the Kübler-Ross model: optimizing communication. Informants described how communication became more deliberate, more frequent, and more focused. This optimization involved clarifying barriers, identifying what remained possible, and acknowledging what could no longer be done. Significantly, communication was not limited to interactions with colleagues. Several PROs reported communicating internally through reflection and self-assessment. YM from R5-SN stated that he evaluated what he could still do and what responsibilities he could no longer manage, demonstrating how internal communication shapes emotional stability.

As communication improved, PROs entered the depressive phase while increasing their awareness of limitations. DK from R4-SM reported that although the discomfort persisted, the team understood that recovery was not immediate. NE from R2-SK added that prolonged exposure to uncertainty led to a decline in the team’s emotional energy. However, it was precisely at this point that the third effort described in the Kübler-Ross framework emerged: the spark of motivation. The analysis shows that motivation was reignited when PROs

and their teams recognized the risks of remaining in a low-performance state. They understood that continued stagnation could worsen organizational conditions. MW from R3-SM described how the team strengthened one another to maintain hope and believed that overcoming the crisis would make them stronger. This renewed motivation helped them transition to the experimentation phase.

Upon entering the experimentation stage, PROs began trying new approaches and exploring different tools. RV from R1-SK described how they initiated small trials to identify what could work under crisis conditions. This stage corresponds with the fourth effort in the Kübler-Ross framework, developing capability. Informants shared how they actively sought solutions by learning digital applications, adjusting communication workflows, and exploring online strategies. DK from R4-SM noted that strategies previously executed offline were now reimagined in online formats. The experimentation phase, therefore, represented a significant shift from emotional reaction to practical adaptation, with PROs enhancing both individual and team capabilities.

As PROs moved into the decision of innovation phase, the fifth effort of the Kübler-Ross model, knowledge sharing, became central. Informants emphasized that disseminating new knowledge allowed innovations to be internalized throughout the team and sustained over time. RV from R1-SK stated that sharing knowledge reinforced the team's commitment to new practices and ensured the continuity of innovation. MW from R3-SM added that the process generated positive emotions and strengthened the team's sense of purpose. This final effort contributed to integrating new communication strategies that positioned PROs and their organizations to navigate the crisis more effectively.

#### 4.2.6 Formula 5C: Adaptation and Innovation Through the Pandemic Crisis

The analysis of the seven phases and five efforts within the Kübler-Ross Change Curve, supported by inductive interpretation of interview data, reveals that the adaptation and innovation processes undertaken by PROs during the pandemic can be synthesized into the Formula 5C. This formula outlines a sequential yet dynamic process of behavioral transformation that enables communication practitioners to move from crisis paralysis toward strategic innovation.

The first component is Change the Paradigm. When PROs initially entered the pandemic environment, many responded with shock and rejection, clinging to pre-crisis assumptions. The findings show that effective adaptation required accepting the irreversible shift in circumstances and consciously reframing their understanding of the organizational environment. This paradigm change involved acknowledging that communication routines, stakeholder expectations, and the broader social context had fundamentally changed. Tapscott (1993) notes that when a paradigm shifts, all prior assumptions must be reexamined, as if starting from zero. For PROs, this meant viewing their roles, tools, and communication challenges through entirely new lenses so that their responses could align with unprecedented conditions.

The second component is Create New Habits. After adopting a new paradigm, PROs began forming routines that aligned with the realities of the pandemic. The data show that these new habits were not formed instantly but through continuous repetition until they evolved into patterned behaviors. Informants described how adapting to remote communication, digital workflows, and virtual coordination became second nature over time. The process also required letting go of old habits associated with pre-pandemic operations. Without discarding outdated practices, PROs would have remained trapped in earlier emotional phases and unable to progress. When PROs failed to cultivate new routines, it indicated that their paradigms had not entirely shifted, reinforcing the need to revisit the foundational stage of mental reframing.

The third component is Creative Approaches. Once new habits were established, PROs began experimenting with innovative communication methods. The findings illustrate how practitioners integrated creativity into their strategies by redesigning message formats, adopting digital platforms for engagement, and exploring unconventional solutions (Hayati & Delliana, 2023). However, using technology-based approaches requires proficiency with digital tools. Informants emphasized that creativity was only possible after adapting to the technological demands of remote communication. If PROs lacked digital literacy or confidence in using online applications, they needed to return to the earlier stage of habit formation before progressing toward innovation. Creativity, in this sense, was not merely the generation of new ideas but a deliberate and informed reimagining of communication practices suited to crisis realities.

The fourth component is Channel Optimization. Hardjana (2019) observes that communication intensity increases significantly during crises. Consistent with this insight, informants described how PROs had to maximize every available communication channel to maintain relationships with stakeholders. This optimization included strengthening internal briefings, enhancing external messaging, increasing digital

presence, and ensuring that communication channels remained open and responsive. By optimizing their communication networks, PROs expanded their reach and sustained stakeholder trust despite physical limitations imposed by the pandemic.

The fifth component is the Collaborative Agreement. The findings emphasize that navigating the pandemic requires collective effort. PROs described how collaboration strengthened morale, improved coordination, and ensured consistent messaging. Informants stressed the importance of unity, shared commitment, and mutual support within their teams. Collaborative agreement represented not only interpersonal harmony but also strategic cohesion, enabling PROs and their organizations to face challenges together and implement innovative solutions more effectively.

Together, these five components form the Formula 5C, a model that reflects the integrated behavioral, cognitive, and strategic transformations observed among PROs during the pandemic. The formula demonstrates that adaptation and innovation are interconnected processes shaped by shifting paradigms, the formation of new habits, creative experimentation, optimized communication, and collective commitment. This model contributes to a deeper understanding of how communication practitioners can lead organizational resilience during prolonged crises.



Figure 2. 5C Formula, Adaptation and Innovation During the Pandemic, processed results from researchers

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the behavior of Public Relations Officers during the COVID-19 pandemic followed a distinct progression shaped by emotional, cognitive, and strategic responses to prolonged disruption. As every organizational member functions as a PRO when communication becomes critical, the findings reveal that PROs experienced initial phases of shock, denial, frustration, and depression before gradually moving into experimentation, innovation, and integration. Their narratives show that PRO behavior in a crisis is characterized by emotional turbulence, role expansion, heightened responsibility, and a sustained effort to stabilize internal and external communication. These behavioral patterns highlight the central role of PROs in maintaining organizational resilience during extreme uncertainty.

The study also identifies how PROs adapted and innovated to navigate the crisis. Adaptation occurred when PROs acknowledged the reality of the pandemic and reorganized their work through new routines, remote workflows, and digital coordination. Innovation emerged as PROs experimented with communication technologies, redesigned message strategies, and adopted creative solutions to replace traditional methods disrupted by social restrictions. Their strategy combined emotional resilience, technological learning, and collaborative problem solving. The findings show that effective crisis navigation required both gradual adjustment to new conditions and deliberate innovation to address rapidly changing stakeholder needs.

Finally, the study formulates the 5C Model as a synthesis of the adaptation and innovation processes observed in the field. The first two components, Change the Paradigm and Create New Habits, represent the adaptive foundation through which PROs reframed their assumptions and developed routines suited to crisis conditions. The remaining components, Creative Approaches, Channel Optimization, and Collaborative Agreement, reflect the innovative strategies that enable organizations to expand communication capacity, utilize digital platforms effectively, and strengthen teamwork. The Formula 5C therefore provides an integrated framework that captures the behavioral, cognitive, and strategic transformation of PROs during the pandemic and offers practical guidance for communication practitioners facing future crises.

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