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COMMUNICATIONS



Reputational Randomness The Variable Almost No Crisis Committee Wants to See

A practical reading of Leonard Mlodinow for corporate communications and crisis management

Author: Francisco Zambrano

Analysis Paper
September 2026

Introduction

In corporate communications, we often work from a dangerous premise: if we understand the facts well, we will be able to explain the results clearly. But reputational reality does not always work that way.

A crisis may escalate because of factors that were not entirely under control: the political moment, the public mood, the involvement of an influencer, an unexpected news story, an especially active digital community or, simply, an unfortunate combination of circumstances.

Physicist and science writer Leonard Mlodinow explores this phenomenon in *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives*, a work devoted to explaining how chance influences life, business, success, failure and decision-making far more than we usually admit.

His contribution is especially useful for those of us who work in reputation and crisis management: it forces us to accept that not everything that happens has a neat, linear and obvious cause. Nor does every successful outcome prove that the strategy was brilliant.

1. Mlodinow's Core Ideas

Mlodinow argues that human beings have enormous difficulty accepting randomness. We prefer to construct orderly explanations, even when reality was far more uncertain.

His main ideas can be summarized as follows:

We confuse randomness with merit or blame

When someone succeeds, we tend to say, "he was a genius." When someone fails, we say, "she made a mistake." Mlodinow reminds us that talent and errors are often involved, but so are random circumstances that amplify or sink an outcome.

In reputation, this means that a brand may emerge from a crisis relatively unscathed not only because of its strategy, but also because the context was favorable. Another may suffer enormous damage not only because of the original mistake, but because of the way that mistake was amplified.

We construct stories after the fact

Once something has happened, it seems obvious that it was going to happen. This is known as hindsight bias. After a crisis, everyone seems to know exactly what should have been done.

But before the crisis erupted, there were almost always several possible outcomes.

Patterns can be deceptive

The brain looks for order even where there is only noise. That is why we see trends, signals and causal relationships where there may be only coincidences or normal fluctuations.

In communications, this may lead us to overreact to a small digital conversation or, conversely, to ignore an early signal that really did anticipate a larger problem.

A small sample can be misleading

Three viral complaints do not necessarily mean there is a structural crisis. Three consecutive successes do not prove that a brand is invulnerable, either.

Organizations often become excited or alarmed by very little evidence. The challenge is to interpret data methodically, not anxiously.

Regression to the mean exists

Extreme results tend to return to more normal levels. A brand may have an especially bad week and then stabilize. A spokesperson may deliver a brilliant interview and later return to his or her usual level.

A brand may face a wave of criticism on social media because of a poorly received advertising campaign, yet the conversation loses intensity days later. A company president may face questions about ties to a notoriously corrupt politician, but a new scandal may shift public attention elsewhere.

This requires us not to overinterpret either immediate success or immediate failure.

Success usually contains more randomness than we admit

This does not mean that talent, preparation or strategy do not matter. It means they increase the probability of success but do not completely control the outcome.

What matters is not predicting everything, but managing probabilities

Mlodinow does not propose resignation. He proposes strategic humility: designing better processes while recognizing that the world is not entirely controllable.

2. Application to Communications and Crisis Management

In corporate communications, Mlodinow's ideas are especially valuable because a crisis rarely behaves like a straight line. Reputation is not a machine. It is a living, emotional, social and probabilistic system.

Do not confuse noise with a crisis

On social media, a brand may receive an initial wave of criticism and panic. But not every negative conversation is a reputational crisis.

20 negative comments	"A crisis is coming"	"We need to measure volume, reach, speed and actors"
An influencer criticizes	"Our reputation is lost"	"Let's assess credibility, community and capacity to mobilize"
A hashtag appears	"It has exploded"	"Let's see whether it moves beyond the initial bubble"

The key is to separate signal from noise before making public decisions.

Do not construct false explanations too quickly

In a crisis, teams tend to rush to say, "This happened because of X." But often that explanation is merely the most convenient one.

A campaign may go wrong and everyone may blame the community manager. Yet other factors may have played a role: poor timing, social sensitivities, the political context, a product problem, weak spokesperson performance or simple bad luck amplified by the algorithm.

Instead of asking only, "Who failed?", it is better to ask:

- What did we know before we acted?
- Which variables were beyond our control?
- Which signals did we ignore?
- What part was error and what part was random amplification?
- Was the process poor, or only the outcome?

The difference is crucial: a good process can produce a bad outcome. And a bad process can succeed through luck.

Prepare scenarios, not exact predictions

The purpose of a crisis committee is not to predict the future. It is to design ranges of response.

Instead of stating: "This will die down within 24 hours."

It is better to say: "We have three scenarios: low, medium and high impact. If the conversation stays on social media, we respond this way. If it reaches the news media, we activate the spokesperson. If an authority, regulator, union or victims become involved, we move to the expanded crisis committee."

That is probabilistic thinking applied to communications.

Beware of success bias

Many brands survive a crisis and then conclude: "We handled it perfectly."

Sometimes that is true. But sometimes they were simply lucky: the issue did not escalate because there was a bigger news story, because the affected party lacked media reach or because the algorithm did not push the conversation.

After a crisis, evaluating the outcome is not enough. The process must also be evaluated.

Useful questions:

- Did we respond in time?
- Were our messages consistent?
- Did we have evidence to support what we said?
- Was the spokesperson prepared?
- Did operations correct the real problem?
- Did we depend on luck or on strategy?

Build reputation to withstand randomness

A company cannot control when a crisis will arrive, but it can control the reputational capital it has built beforehand.

A brand with accumulated trust has a greater margin for error. A damaged brand enters every crisis with less oxygen.

Practical applications:

- Build credibility before it is needed
- Train spokespersons before the fire starts
- Document good practices
- Maintain relationships with the media, communities and key stakeholders
- Do not communicate only when there is a problem

Reputation is a strategic reserve against randomness.

Communicate uncertainty without appearing weak

Many crises worsen because a company wants to sound overly certain when it does not yet have all the facts.

A responsible statement might be:

"We are reviewing the available information, have activated our internal protocols and will share verified updates as the investigation progresses."

Mlodinow would remind us that pretending to have certainty in an uncertain system is dangerous. In a crisis, well-worded humility can be more powerful than feigned confidence.

Conclusion

Mlodinow's great lesson for communications and crisis management is this: not every reputational outcome is proportional to the original error. Sometimes a small mistake explodes. Sometimes a serious one does not escalate.

That is why a consultant should not sell absolute control. A consultant should offer a better reading of the context, better probabilities, better processes and a stronger capacity to respond.

In a crisis, randomness always has a seat at the table. The difference lies in whether the brand ignores it or learns to manage it.

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