

**To Be Responsible, Or Not To Be Responsible:
Managing Guilt After Organization-Level Failures**

ABSTRACT

Organizational responses to failures are traditionally classified into accommodative strategies, through which the organization accepts responsibility for the failure by apologizing and implementing corrective action, and defensive strategies, through which the organization does not accept responsibility by denying or by providing justifications. However, the complexity of large organizations entails that it can take years to establish whether an alleged failure has occurred at all and to what extent a specific organization is responsible for it. Given the high level of media interest after an organization-level failure, organizations need to communicate with the public about their potential guilt, but are ill-advised to deny or admit any guilt, before they are eventually either convicted or exonerated. We refer to this discursive practice of addressing guilt without admitting or denying it as guilt management. The contribution of this paper is twofold. Based on a review of guilt in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and law, we first contribute a theoretical understanding of organizational guilt, which is not an established concept yet. Second, we conduct a fine-grained discourse analysis of organizational guilt management to arrive at an empirically grounded understanding of guilt-management strategies used by organizations under suspicion of a large-scale failure.

Keywords:

Legitimacy, language, qualitative, discourse, guilt, organizational failure