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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- BE HONEST AND OPEN
- TACKLE ISSUES EARLY
- CONSIDER THE IMPACT
- SUPPORT THOSE AFFECTED#
- PLAN AND PREPARE

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WHAT HAPPENED?

There has been one situation that dominated the first part of September in the UK and that was the closure of some schools just days before they were due to return for the new academic year. The reason for 104 full or partial closures was the issue of RAAC a steel reinforced version of aerated concrete that was found to have weaknesses. RAAC was widely adopted in the 1960s and 1970s but between 1980 and 2000 problems emerged.

RAAC was used in many public buildings including schools and hospitals. In 2018, a roof collapsed at a school in Kent. There were no injuries but it increased awareness of the problem of RAAC in buildings. In February, this year unions demanded action on the 'shocking state' of schools in the country.

The Department for Education made the announcement of the closures in the days before the September new term with many schools and colleges left with an immediate challenge of moving to online learning or finding alternative accommodation. Despite providing the information that 104 school and colleges were affected the UK Government refused to provide details of which schools they were prompting a media frenzy.

Once the list was finally provided, they agreed to provide fortnightly updates on the operational situation in relation to RAAC and schools.

What was the communication response and what could it have been?

Education minister Gillian Keegan went out publicly to explain the situation and to defend the Government's approach to the problem of RAAC. This included trying to provide details of why the action was deemed necessary now after many years of discussing the issue. She became the focus of the story for a while after she was caught making comments off camera which included swearing and claiming others had left the problem to get to this point. She was forced to apologise for the bad language but blamed the reporter for continuing to film.

One of the main communication problems was a lack of clarity about which schools were affected. The media started to compile their own lists. They spoke to schools and parents to start to build up a map of where the 104 schools and colleges were.

Meanwhile, the Government said they would provide a list, but it took many days before it finally emerged. This presented an impression that the information was being withheld for some reason.

There was extensive coverage of the problem and how it was impacting on other buildings as well including hospitals and health centres. It has disappeared out of the media headlines now, but the Government have made a commitment to update the list of affected schools and how it is impacting on them on a fortnightly basis. It will be one that reporters will return to in the coming weeks.

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What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Provide information as a default position – honesty and transparency are easily demonstrated by asking why information should be withheld rather than why it should be provided. Publishing the list would have been a demonstration of openness.
- Address problems when they are in their infancy – this situation has been in existence for a number of years, but little appears to have been done. Tackling issues early can prevent them becoming a crisis later.
- Minimise the impact on those affected – the children are at the centre of this situation and ensuring they continue to receive their education. The actions should have kept the at the centre of the discussion and decision making.
- Be aware of the media spotlight – whether she meant to do it or not, Gillian Keegan needed to remember the basics of media training and that you are on camera whenever you are stood with a journalist, and definitely when you are wearing a microphone.
- Be sensitive in the words chosen – at one point the Education Minister said that children preferred to work in temporary accommodation which lacked sensitivity to those who had been through the challenge of finding ways to continue their education.
- Recognise the impact of the situation – making this decision in the summer would have reduced the impact allowing remedial action to be taken or alternative accommodation to be sourced ready for the start of the school year.

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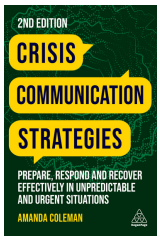

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