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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- BE HUMAN
- PLAN AND TEST
- WORDS MATTER
- CONSIDER THOSE AFFECTED
- AVOID COMPLACENCY

WHAT HAPPENED?

In January 2024 two football matches had to be postponed or delayed due to medical emergencies involving supporters. On Sunday 28 January the Manchester United match against Newport was halted as medics went into the stands to help someone in the crowd. The match was delayed but was able to continue and be completed.

Earlier in the month a match between Bolton Wanderers and Cheltenham Town was abandoned when a fan collapsed and sadly later died.

The two situations had an impact wider than on the continuation of the match. Those at the grounds and near the incidents will have been affected, as well as the staff at the club and officiating at the matches and even the players.

The events took place at football matches, but it is important to recognise that such situations can occur at any public events. Event management and planning needs to consider and plan for such risks and particularly the communication that takes place.

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

After the abandonment of the Bolton Wanderers match, the club released a statement of concern about the situation and the impact on family and friends. They explained that the fan who died would be remembered at the next match that was due to take place.

In contrast The Sun newspaper was heavily criticised for their reporting of the situation. They had written about the match being abandoned under the headline 'Footie binned...over ill fan'. Supporters and football fans took to social media to criticise the sun for their insensitivity, and they demanded an apology.

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The apology came the following day. The Sun printed: "The Sun apologises for the headline in the news pages of the print edition of Sunday's paper about fan (name), which was insensitive. Our condolences to (name) family and friends."

However, the apology was not accepted by many who felt it was insincere and had failed to provide any action for the family concerned. The Sun reputation in many places in the North is poor but appears to have been tarnished further in light of the response to the situation.

The situation involving the Manchester United match attracted less coverage which appears to be due to the match being able to continue.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Focus on the people affected - I hope that there was support available from the clubs to the supporters who were affected and to their families
- Be human when you talk about the situation - these are real lives and real people, so it is important to be human in the response and show some emotion
- Words matter - take care over the words used and if possible, reflect on how those affected will view the statement that you make
- Plan for risks at events - when regular events take place it is easy to become complacent but instead ensure crisis and emergency plans are in place
- Regularly test plans - discuss the communication activities and approaches that need to be undertaken in emergencies
- Be genuine - ensure that your response is authentic and can be trusted by people reading or viewing it
- Find a way to recognise the impact - when something significant has happened some form of memorial, tribute or recognition of the situation demonstrates the concern about what has happened

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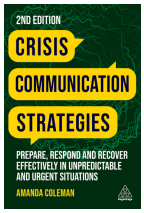

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