VOL 49, JUNE 2024

TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- HONESTY IS ESSENTIAL
- AVOID THE 'GOOD LIE'
- LISTEN TO THOSE AFFECTED
- CHALLENGE GROUP THINK
- SHARE FACTS
- BUILD TRUST

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WHAT HAPPENED?

At the end of May a lengthy report was published with details uncovered from the Infected Blood Inquiry. It made very interesting reading and highlighted a horrendous situation where people's lives were devastated by being given infected blood and then not being given the truth about the situation. It has been labelled the 'worst treatment disasters in the history of the NHS'.

Between 1970 and the early 1990s more than 30,000 people NHS patients were given blood transfusions and treatments where blood contaminated with hepatitis C or HIV was used. More than 3,000 people have died as a result and thousands continue to have their lives affected by what happened. The seven-volume report talks of 'institutional defensiveness' and that the situation should and could have been examined decades ago.

It is estimated one infected person dies every four days. In 2017 a public inquiry was announced to investigate the causes and effects of the infected blood scandal to reach the truth of what happened. In 2022 an independent report recommended compensation be paid despite any 'legal liability' issues or the findings of the inquiry. The UK Government made some initial payments in 2022 but was far from the compensation package that was recommended in the interim report. The report published this month found 'repeated use of defensive and misleading lines' by Governments, that there was a failure to put patient safety first, that risks was not managed effectively, that successive governments refused to admit responsibility and that there was a cover up.

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

There have been some persistent journalists who have continued to highlight the issue and try to draw attention to the claims about what happened. One of note was Caroline Wheeler who wrote the book Death in the Blood published in 2023. The report itself led to agreement across the media that it was the most shocking situation and that compensation needed to be provided as swiftly as possible.

As the report was published those who were affected told of gaslighting that had taken place over years and that an apology was meaningless unless it was clear what the 'sorry' was in relation to. The report supported the gaslighting position detailing that there was 'repeated use of defensive and misleading lines' given to patients, families and others.

But it is the communication issues that were raised within the report that are of huge significance. Recognition that there was a cover up and that a defensive culture prevented the issue being highlighted and investigated earlier. It stated: "Communication means listening: it is more talking with, than talking to."

In addition this comment would be relevant to any organisation and communication team: "Government in a democracy should trust its citizens to know the facts which government knows, unless there is a proper reason for secrecy. Those facts should convey the unvarnished truth: government does not need to assume that its citizens need to be protected against bad news, or news that alerts them to a particular risk, for fear they may panic. Citizens need to be told rather than reassured. "

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Honesty and integrity are critical to the running of organisations, governments and businesses.
- This would support the duty of candour but it needs to be applied effectively.
- Listening to those affected, raising issues, or with perceptions of the way a business or organisation operates or has managed a situation is vital. It is required for effective communication.
- Avoid group think when working in an organisation. This is challenging to achieve but is essential if issues, risks and problems are to be managed at the earliest opportunity.
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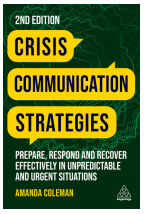
- Organisations need to build trust with the public and communities that they serve or who they provide products and services to. Avoid the 'good lie' where you tell people what you think they want to hear whether it is accurate or not.
- Apologise and take responsibility for what has happened. Making an apology needs to be done with clarity about what it is in relation to and what it means, and of course, that it is genuine.
- Provide people with facts not reassurance. This links the honesty and the challenge of the 'good lie' and is essential for PR and communicators to understand and act upon.
- Review the approach to issues management so that there is an honest discussion of problems and how to address them rather than to brush over them.

For advice on issues management get a copy of Everyday Communication Strategies



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