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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- ENSURE SUPPORT AND INFORMATION TO AFFECTED PEOPLE
- CHOOSE YOUR WORDS WITH CARE
- PROVIDE INFORMATION FIRST
- PLAN AND PREPARE NOW
- EXPLAIN DIFFICULT PROCESSES SENSITIVELY

WHAT HAPPENED?

At the very end of 2024 there was a devastating plane crash in South Korea. The incident could be seen on footage that detailed its last moments. Of the 181 people on board, only two survived.

In the immediate aftermath there were questions about what had caused the accident, why the landing gear was not working and also why there was a concrete wall so close to the runway run-off area.

The acting president of South Korea ordered an investigation into all planes in the country and also demanded that the families were provided with information as quickly as possible. Families had expressed frustration at the slow identification process and were calling for the swift release of more information.

In the days that followed, the CEO of Jeju Air, Kim Yi-bae, gave a press conference and said the Boeing 737-800 had shown 'nothing abnormal' in pre-flight inspections. He explained that the black boxes were being inspected along with the data from the voice recorder but there were problems because of a missing critical connector. In addition, the CEO said he would 'repair trust' by strengthening safety measures and reducing winter air traffic.
Just a couple of days later the CEO was banned from leaving the country by police as the investigation continued and the offices were searched.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

In previous years we would not have seen the moment that a plane crashed. Now we not only see it, but we expect to see it. This adds to the speculation about the cause of the disaster and the circulation of rumours from a very early stage. It puts authorities in a difficult position as they attempt to begin an investigation. All this highlights the importance of crisis planning and preparation, and the ability to be ready to start communication immediately after an emergency occurs. The CEO apologised at an early stage, but it was unclear what that related to.

The big issue for families was the need to have confirmation and details of their loved ones. But disaster victim identification takes time, and the gruesome details of the situation had to be explained to grieving families. Such conversations are incredibly difficult and need to be handled sensitively to ensure they are understood.

In the aftermath, the media were challenged about the approach they took, including showing personal effects at the disaster site and filming family members who were given the devastating news about their loved ones.

Professor Lucy Easthope, a disaster recovery expert, said that, following the Lockerbie disaster, the media approach had been discussed to avoid additional distress to those affected.

The press conference by the CEO may become problematic, given the steps taken by the police two days later. It was a time to share relevant information but not to talk about building back confidence in the business. There is a time for that and it is in the months ahead, not a couple of days after the tragedy happened.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Support affected people – it is easy to label them as people but they are family members who are grieving the loss of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces, etc. They have to be at the centre of the response.
- Take care with the words used – there was mention of family members being given brutal explanations of the impact the crash had on their loved ones. It is important to be honest but to do this while being careful about the words used.
- Focus on the information and not the reputational impact – the press conference by the airline's CEO appeared to be focused on trying to limit damage to the brand. In the early stages of a crisis the focus needs to be on the victims, their families and any immediate actions.
- Plan and prepare – spending time developing, considering and reviewing plans is critical to being crisis ready. Even if you think you have prepared, there is always more that can be done.
- Disaster victim identification needs to be sensitively explained – this is an issue that continues to arise after significant disasters, so it is essential more is done to be able to explain the process to families and also to the media.
- Monitor developments in your industry and ensure your plans are up to date – when emergencies happen to others, review the situation and make amendments to your own approach.
- Apologies are useful but only when it is clear what they are for – when apologies are made too quickly they can lack credibility and it can be unclear what they relate to.

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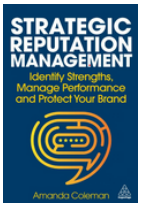

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