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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- ENSURE CLARITY OF INFORMATION
- CO-ORDINATE MESSAGES QUICKLY
- LAY OUT CLEAR ROLES
- PROVIDE LOCAL INFORMATION
- CORRECT INACCURACIES IMMEDIATELY

WHAT HAPPENED?

At 9.48 am on Monday 10 March the alarm was raised that there had been a collision between two ships in the North Sea, on the East side of the UK. The vessels involved were the Stena Immaculate, which was a US-registered ship transporting aviation fuel for the military, and the Portuguese-registered Solong, which was thought to be carrying chemicals. There were 23 people on board the Stena Immaculate and 14 on the Solong.

One man has been charged with gross negligence manslaughter, as one of the crew members on the Solong was unaccounted for after the rescue had taken place. Proceedings are active and this case study is not looking at the circumstances of what happened but at the detail of the communication that followed the incident. There were many inaccuracies in the early information provided, including in relation to the crew members, the chemicals on the Solong and the stability of the vessels.

The incident led to a significant blaze and the concern that there would be a substantial environmental disaster in the Humber Estuary, East Yorkshire, where many birds were in the process of nesting. In addition, there was concern that the vessels would become unstable and may sink.

The UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency and Humberside Police are investigating the incident. A number of different countries are involved: the charged man is a Russian national; the Solong had a crew from the Philippines; the vessel was Portuguese-registered and German-owned; it happened in UK waters and involved a US vessel.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

The communication was reported a few hours after the incident had happened. On breaking news there was brief information of the collision, which was quickly followed by a range of interviewees, including marine experts. The movements of the vessels were tracked using software, as seen with flight tracking, and this information was quickly shared, showing the location and the moments leading to the collision.

As more information was shared, one of the first to be interviewed was the Chief Executive of the Port of Grimsby, who provided a lot of information about the rescue and the weather conditions at the time of the incident. In the hours that followed, some of the information proved to be incorrect. The lack of clarity about who was able to provide the clearest information in those early stages allowed rumour and inaccuracy to circulate.

Few people understand the laws and conventions relating to incidents that occur at sea. Finding ways to explain this clearly would have assisted journalists and helped the public to understand what was happening. There were many consequences from the incident, as is always the case with significant crises and disasters.

This led to many voices of concern: from fishermen unable to work, from environmentalists worried about the impact of the collision and from local people. The arrest happened swiftly, which limited the information that was provided. But specialist publications are tracking the salvage operation. The following day, the situation was mentioned in the House of Commons, in a statement by Mike Kane MP from the Department of Transport. In providing details of what happened and of the response, it was clear the complex situation was being managed on many levels and by different organisations, including the MCA, Maritime Accident Investigation Branch, Humberside Police and local resilience forums. This was an obvious challenge in co-ordinating and providing information.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Quick identification of a clear process for the delivery of communication when it involves multiple agencies offshore. This would have ensured that the facts could have been established early and some of the inaccuracies may have been avoided.
- When information proves to be inaccurate, immediate correction is vital so that it doesn't spread and lead to additional concerns.
- Development of information packages that can be shared to explain complex situations to both the media and the public. This can include providing examples that make the scale and detail easier to imagine among non-mariners.
- Early creation of a multi-agency communication cell that involves all those responding to the incident, including a link to business representatives. This would allow closer management of the communication from the first hour it happened.
- Co-ordinating information across multiple countries adds further complexity. Plans can assist in identifying the roles and responsibilities of each in relation to the communication.
- Local information is critical to support the response, even when there is international interest in a crisis situation. People living in an area affected by an incident should receive direct communication rather than just being required to watch the news.
- Taking care with details of survivors or potential fatalities. For a while it was believed that all of those onboard the vessels were safe, but this proved to be inaccurate. If information about survivors is not 100 per cent guaranteed, it should not be provided as fact.
- Training and testing of plans is always important and it is essential to make them as stretching as possible so everyone is ready for such significant disasters and emergencies.

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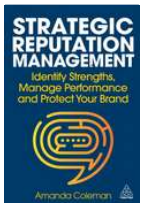

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