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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- BUILD TRUST
- HONESTY MATTERS
- TAKE CARE WITH WORDS
- KNOW YOUR REPUTATION

WHAT HAPPENED?

This edition of Testing Times is taking a look at leadership and its role in effective crisis communication. There have been a number of significant incidents that have taken place during May and while some are now subject of court proceedings, they have highlighted some key issues. Leadership and trust are the essentials for crisis communication in 2025.

The report into the Heathrow power outage found that the Chief Executive could not be contacted throughout the evening. His phone was said to have switched to mute. Whatever the case if you are the person at the top of the organisation when something significant has happened, you must be contactable and available. Even if it means having a special phoneline or expecting someone to arrive with a car at your door.

An additional challenge for the Heathrow executive was that the situation was not made clear at the start of the crisis. Once the truth has been hidden the damage to trust has been done.

The recent shocking events in Liverpool at the end of the football clubs victory parade have also brought home the importance of being ready to address misinformation and disinformation. There were videos circulating almost instantly and more than a week later there are extensive rumours and speculation on social media. There were lots of pleas from authorities for people firstly not to share footage and secondly not to speculate. But despite the appeals the chatter continued.

At the start of the month, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer made an immigration speech that was widely criticised for the tone and the words that were used. The language was condemned for being sympathetic to the views of the far right.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

In each of the situations mentioned there are leadership challenges as new expectations are put on those at the top of businesses and organisations. Not only do they need to oversee the response to significant events, but they must be visible both to the public and staff. They must engage effectively with stakeholders.

In the Heathrow case there were appropriate steps taken by the deputy according to the report reviewing what happened. While that is positive, it was overshadowed by the situation involving the CEO.

The role at the top of the business will be in the spotlight so has an opportunity to build and develop or face criticism. If the situation of the phone being muted was explained at the start of the crisis the impact would have been reduced. Modern crisis communication needs to be updated to take account of the impact of both social media and mis and disinformation. It is not enough to have a process of sharing information through one message or statement, you need to keep sharing information, explaining what is happening and answering questions. All this needs to be done within the legal framework and while it can be achieved it takes care and a new approach.

Throughout all crisis communication we need to consider what words we use, what they will mean and how they may be interpreted. What may appear as a factual statement could be viewed in an unexpected way.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Build trust every day – make sure your communication builds the brand and reputation for the moments when a crisis occurs, and it is under pressure.
- Understand what your reputation is – both for the business and for the most senior person or CEO. If you know what people think and feel about you before a crisis, you can tailor the communication and respond more effectively.
- Words matter so take care with them – it is important to ensure that you don't say anything that can be unearthed as untrue or that will cause widespread concern overshadowing what you were trying to explain.
- Ensure what you do and what you say match – it is not enough to say something you have to be showing it through the actions that are taken to respond to the situation.
- Honesty, honesty, honesty – this is vital as the moment you are seen to be less than honest about the situation it will significantly damage trust throughout the response and possibly even into the recovery phase.
- Be a modern and proactive leader – take the responsibility of both overseeing and communicating about the situation. Ensure you can do this with empathy, humanity and authenticity.

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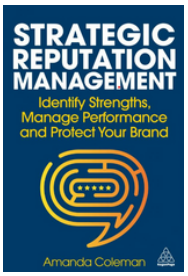

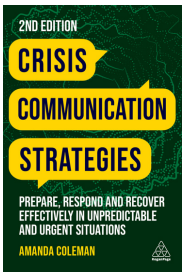

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