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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- PEOPLE MATTER
- CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES OF DECISIONS
- HONESTY IS CRITICAL
- ENSURE CLARITY
- PUT LONG TERM SUPPORT IN PLACE

WHAT HAPPENED?

During September more than a thousand prisoners were released at the start of an early release scheme across UK jails. The scheme will see 5,000 prisoners released under a Government scheme to reduce overcrowding in prisons. There was extensive criticism of the approach. Under the scheme anyone with a sentence of less than four years and that is not a violent offender may be released. In the first wave 1,700 people were released.

But after the first wave of prisoners were released, it became clear that 37 had been released incorrectly. This was because they had been recorded under outdated legislation which was not recognised when the system was put in place. It meant that people with domestic abuse convictions including a breach of restraining order who should not have been eligible were released.

The situation only came to light when a man who had been released early was accused of a sex offence which alerted the media to the situation. After the 37 incorrect releases were highlighted the Ministry of Justice said urgent action was being taken to return them to prison and all but one had been located. They added that all the victims had been contacted.

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COMMUNICATION

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

From the moment that the scheme was announced it led to extensive reporting by the media alongside criticism from charities and victim support groups. Reporters positioned themselves outside prison and documented the release including images of people leaving and appearing to laugh at authorities.

Refuge criticised the inaccurate releases and spoke about concerns about the repercussions and the impact of the situation on survivors. The situation raised questions about whether all the victims or survivors connected to the 5,000 due to be released had been, or would be, contacted before they were let out.

His Majesty's Inspector of Prisons chief inspector said the inappropriate release of some prisoners was 'disappointing', but prison officers had speculated that it would be inevitable. The inspector also criticised the lack of support to those released which was necessary to move them away from reoffending.

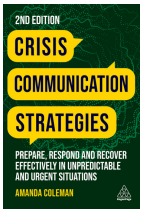
One father was interviewed by the media and said his newly released son had already returned to the 'wrong crowd' because there was no support available.

The response from the Ministry of Justice was to state 'public safety is our first priority' despite the problem that had occurred. They continued with a political statement about the state of prisons while stressing that all those released in error had been monitored.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- People need to be at the centre of any policy decision or problem that emerges and should be at the forefront of the considerations.
- Decisions should be stress tested so that the consequences and potential implications are identified, considered and then can be addressed.
- In this situation it is not just the victims who had been affected, support packages needed to be in place for those being released from prison.
- Communication is critical and the victims and survivors needed to receive information throughout the release.
- Organisations need to test their systems and check them before they are implemented so problems can be rectified.
- Honesty is critical and with the new Hillsborough Law on the horizon statements need to reflect the truth of the situation.
- Statements need to be clear and should say something meaningful while avoiding the standard phrases such as XX is a priority.
- The situation can have long term implications and support for both victims and offenders needs to be in place for an extended period of time.
- People should not be ignored so that political points can be made.

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



For more case studies and crisis communication tips get a copy of Crisis Communication Strategies by Amanda Coleman available at book stores and on Amazon.

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