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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- AFFECTED PEOPLE FIRST
- ONGOING SUPPORT
- MOVE QUICKLY
- PROVIDE UPDATES

WHAT HAPPENED?

At the end of October, convicted sex offender Hadush Kebatu was released in error from Chelmsford Prison. Kebatu's arrest in July sparked protests outside The Bell Hotel in Epping, which was being used to house asylum seekers. He had entered the UK on a small boat in late June from his original home in Ethiopia. On 24 October, he was accidentally released from prison when he should have been sent to an immigration detention centre before being deported.

A delivery driver who was outside prison at the time said Kebatu was outside for an hour and a half and was 'very confused' and that he was directed by staff to Chelmsford railway station still wearing a grey prison tracksuit. A police manhunt began, and they appealed for the public's help and for Kebatu to give himself up.

On Sunday morning he was arrested in Finsbury Park, London following information provided by a member of the public. UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer ordered an independent investigation and said Kebatu would be deported.

The family of one of Kebatu's victims, a schoolgirl, told the media they felt 'let down' and highlighted that they had learnt of the accidental release from a journalist and saw information being circulated online before the police got in contact.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

The fact that the family of the schoolgirl heard about the situation from the media and were confronted by the social media images of him being released before any official contact should not have happened. They should have been the top priority on the plan and contacted to explain that the information was being released to find him quickly.

The information being released and circulated quickly with images did bring about the effective result of Kebatu being arrested and returned to custody.

It is the widespread sharing of his image and details that ensured members of the public were informed and able to spot him and contact the police. The situation quickly became a political football with criticism of the Government and commentators claiming that it was embarrassing for them.

But this should have been secondary to the immediate trauma that was affecting Kebatu's victims. It is a story that was destined to continue for many days as the media followed what happened to Kebatu, the comments from Government minsters, the investigation into the prison release and how it happened, and the Prison Inspectorate comments and figures on the increased number of prisoners being released in error.

Throughout all this, those who are directly affected by Kebatu's crimes need to have support available throughout.

As this edition was going to press, the Home Office announced that Kebatu had been deported and returned to Ethiopia. It is hoped that the information was given to those affected by his crimes before it was made public. They were forced to admit he was given £500 to avoid a lengthy legal challenge.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Affected people should have found out before anyone else - there should be no situation where those who were targeted by Kebatu found out through the media and social media. Even though this can be challenging to achieve, it has to be the top priority.
- Support to those affected should be in place throughout the coming months and the ongoing media focus.
- Information was shared quickly - this was vital to try to track down Kebatu and ensure that he was returned to custody.
- Direct appeal - making a direct appeal in the early house of the next day with additional footage of him, helped to keep it front of mind and in the media headlines.
- Widespread coverage ensured the public were more likely to spot Kebatu and contact the police which is how he was found.
- Investigations are important but need to provide a result and outcome quickly, particularly in such public and high profile cases. This can be a challenge when going through a set procedure.
- Understand the consequences of situations - with the release of Kebatu there was a possibility of further community unrest, protests, commentary about prisons, and a focus on the operation of prisons. Once the situations are understood, they can be prepared for.
- Be open about the circumstances of a situation - the fact money was given to Kebatu to avoid a lengthy legal challenge should have been provided openly to avoid a view there was limited transparency.

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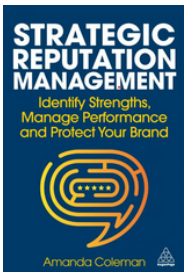

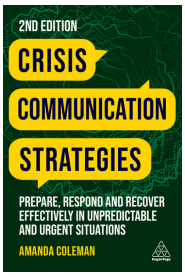

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