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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- BE OPEN TO CHALLENGE AND ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY WHEN NECESSARY
- UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT THE SITUATION HAS HAD
- MOVE QUICKLY AND BE VISIBLE
- BE TRAINED AND READY TO SPEAK PUBLICLY
- KEEP COMMUNICATING

WHAT HAPPENED?

A long running crisis situation has been occurring in the South East of England which came back into the spotlight during January. South East Water has faced repeated problems that have led to the loss of water for many thousands of people. After severe weather, a freeze followed by a thaw, more problems emerged due to pipeline issues. It was the second time in six weeks that customers were left without water.

The latest issue happened at a time when the company was alerting customers to an increase in their water bills. For many this was the first official message that they had received from the company.

The beleaguered Chief Executive David Hinton had already appeared at a Commons Select Committee due to previous outages that lasted for days. During that appearance he gave the company's response 8 out of 10, the communication 6 out of 10 and the prevention 6 out of 10. But campaigners, customers and MPs have all called for him to resign over the failings. Another Select Committee hearing is on the cards and the regulator Ofwat have started an investigation into whether the company has breached its licence.

Compensation is being provided but there are issues with who has received it with the company saying they are not in control of the compensation payments.

What can communication and business learn from the situations?

Throughout the past few months, the CEO and senior management at the company have been absent from the media and providing any commentary beyond appearing at the Select Committee. They pulled out of a Tunbridge Wells Council meeting, and other public meetings have taken place without a representative. These meetings have been filmed by the media who have gathered residents' views that have focused on a lack of confidence in the business and in the quality of the water supply.

People's voices have been the loudest throughout the crisis and video footage from public meetings and documenting personal circumstances have been shared. There were reports that water was taken from a doorstep and that those who were vulnerable did not receive deliveries.

The company's website provided details of the practical impact of the situation including where to find water and the areas that were affected. But it did not address the complaints about the way the situation was managed.

The Chief Executive finally did an interview with local media at the end of January but the feedback from those affected was that they were not convinced by his apologies. You can view the interview here.

It was a reminder that media training and feeling comfortable in front of the camera is still an important part of CEO and leadership training, and being genuine about what you say is critical. Accepting and recognising that things could be better, and taking responsibility, should be part of the public response.

What do we need to remember in these situations?

- Be open to challenge – accepting responsibility when things go wrong means you can provide an explanation and share what is happening to manage the situation.
- Move quickly to start the communication and continue it throughout the crisis, sharing updates and developments as they happen.
- Be visible as a leader – meet those who are affected, listen to their problems, be clear how that is going to support any development to the strategy. Support your staff who are facing people that are affected every day.
- Consider all the audiences you need to communicate with – investors have issued a warning and said they are 'extremely concerned' about the situation with South East Water.
- Ensure exercises consider the reputational impact of operational failures not just the failure itself.
- Business continuity plans are about more than getting things back up and running. They are about explaining what is happening and taking people with you.
- Brief frontline staff so they understand the messages and the most up to date situation. But don't leave them to face criticism alone, provide support and be visible.
- Trust and reputation are fragile and can be lost quickly. South East Water is facing the 'Velcro effect' where everything they do that is problematic is damaging their reputation.
- Recognise the long-term impact on the business and its reputation. Turning things around will take time, a concerted effort, accepting failures, and possibly even leadership changes.

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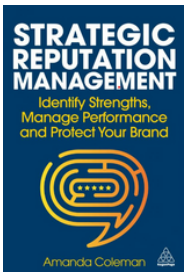

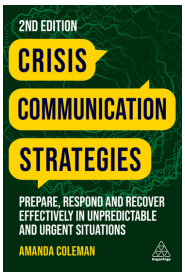

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