VOL 76, SEPTEMBER 2026

# TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

## KEY LEARNING POINTS

- RESPOND AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE
- FACE THE CAMERAS
- UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT
- RECOVERY TAKES TIME

## WHAT HAPPENED?

A police investigation is underway in Australia after Australian Football League players from Sydney Swans were alleged to be involved in an incident at a hotel. Swans players and adult entertainers were in the hotel, and an allegation of inappropriate behaviour and assault was made. Further reporting alleged that there was illegal drug use also taking place.

Five Swans players were identified as being in the room, with disputes about whether they were the only Swans personnel present. The CEO quickly said that the players had been sanctioned and were withdrawn from play just before significant end of season matches. This was because of a breach of club standards by being out late, excessive drinking, and having women in the team hotel. It was stressed that this was separate from the police investigation.

The lawyer for two women said they were seeking damages and had been subject to online abuse. This incident is alleged to have happened just after a double header match with the Swans men's and women's teams. Questions about the incident quickly moved from what happened to behaviour within the AFL, at a time when it is attempting to grow women's participation. The Swans men's and women's teams attempted to show that they were a unified organisation.

Sponsors moved away and supporters voted with their feet and there were empty seats in the last men's game of the season, while the women's team saw a growth in support. The incident is still under investigation by Victoria Police at 31 August 2026.

## What can communication and business learn from the situations?

There has been extensive media coverage in Australia, but this has been limited internationally with just the UK and New Zealand featuring the incident in articles. This may be due to the localised nature of AFL. From an early point, the CEO and chairman made comments about the situation and actions that had been taken.

This did not limit the further discussion about the incident and media reporting that included the lawyer speaking out on behalf of the women involved in the incident, and discussions about the players involved and their backgrounds.

Interviews with players resurfaced in the media that added to issues and concerns. Comments on the situation came from politicians including Sam Mostyn (Governor-General) and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. The Prime Minister's comments moved the situation from one about a sports scandal to a national discussion about behaviour, violence against women and organisational accountability.

Scrutiny came from sponsors which extended the coverage and the behaviour of Richmond Tigers added to the focus on behaviour within AFL clubs. With some supports voting with their feet, it will be a crisis to watch and understand the long-term impact on both the club and the AFL.

### What do we need to remember in these situations?

- Respond quickly to an emerging crisis – the Swans management have not just communicated quickly but have taken some early action.
- Face the cameras – so much of the crisis communication response now is down to the videos and images that are circulated. Identifying an early opportunity to be on camera is essential.
- Focus on what you can say – when there is an ongoing investigation or aspects that are restrictive, focus on what you can say.
- See the bigger implications – crises are rarely about that one incident and can quickly grow into a wider situation with more significant implications such as cultural and societal.
- Treat serious issues seriously – it might sound obvious but don't attempt to downplay or reduce the impact of a significant crisis.
- Reflect on what the crisis reveals about the company or organisation's culture – after the initial incident will come the scrutiny of how the business operates, its culture, standards and behaviour. Be prepared to respond to that.
- When the future is uncertain, map the potential outcomes – be ready to respond no matter which way the situation develops and know what you need to do.
- Recovery takes time – in some cases where the damage to an organisation's reputation is significant or widespread, the road back will be long and require substantial changes and actions to rebuild and regain confidence.

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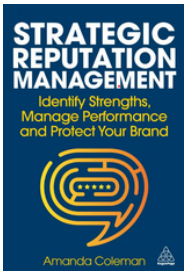


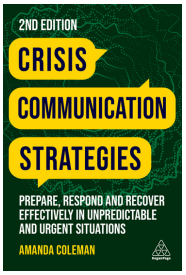


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