

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN TURBULENT TIMES

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INTRODUCTION

During a crisis, quick, decisive communication with the public is critical to ensuring your customers or stakeholders maintain confidence in your company or organization and ultimately your products or services. In a crisis, the media and the public are eager for information as quickly as possible, but many in senior management feel they need to wait until everything is known about a situation with all the facts buttoned down tight before talking publicly. While accuracy is paramount, speed is of the essence as well! In today's 24-hour news cycle, timing is everything.

It is imperative to communicate relevant information during the first news cycle, or it will be difficult if not impossible to regain control of information and messages. 1 ***If you don't speak for your company or organization, someone else will.*** It is in this context the present paper intends to prove the validity, relevance and imperativeness of communicating effectively during turbulent times for the business, government and other organizations alike.

THE DIMENSIONS OF CRISIS OR TURBULENT TIMES IN BUSINESS

A Crisis may come in many sizes and shapes. From national crisis having impact on the entire economy to specific crisis having negative impact on certain industries. Typically, a crisis is an event that occurs unexpectedly, may not be in the organization's control, and may cause harm to the organization's good reputation or viability. True crises have several critical dimensions in common, any one of which, if handled poorly, can disrupt or perhaps destroy best efforts at managing any remaining opportunities to resolve the situation and recover, rehabilitate, or retain reputation. Failure to respond and communicate in ways that meet community standards and expectations will result in a series of negative outcomes.

An example of an organization facing a crisis is the occurrence of a mass shooting of employees by a disgruntled employee or killing of an employee by an outsider. There are instances reported of angry employee killing manager, driver raping and killing women employees at night shift.

There are other business related crises are there as well. An outburst of suppressed mismanagement of resources and erosion of intrinsic value of business itself affecting its sustenance, and what more, the recent mega scams of shocking proportions in Indian corporates that took not just the stake holders but the society at large by great surprise. 2

The crises are not limited to business alone. Instances of police constable shooting seniors over disputes of reported work related harassment, and often abuse of power and position are also reported.

In most instances, the organization is facing some legal or moral culpability for the crisis and stakeholders and the public are judging the organization's response to the crisis. The most challenging part of crisis communication management is reacting - with the right response - quickly. This is because behavior always precedes communication. Non-behavior or inappropriate behavior leads to spin, not communication. In emergencies, it's the non-action and the resulting spin that cause embarrassment, humiliation, prolonged visibility, and unnecessary litigation. 3

SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

All businesses are vulnerable to crises. You can't serve any population without being subjected to situations involving lawsuits, accusations of impropriety, sudden changes in company ownership or management, and other volatile situations. No matter what size your business is, everyone needs to be prepared to handle potentially negative situations and to effectively communicate with employees, customers, the general public and the media. 4

A dozen Rules:

Here are a dozen and odd rules which could be used effectively during the time of turbulent business times.

1. **Communicate, communicate, and communicate.** The first rule of crisis management is to communicate. Early hours are critical and they set the tone for the duration of the crisis. The media's first questions are likely to be simple and predictable: Remaining silent or appearing removed, perhaps on the advice of legal counsel, tends to enrage the public and other stakeholders. A balanced communications strategy must be developed that protects corporate liability while satisfying the demands of today's information and media dynamic.
2. **Respect the role of the media.** The media are not the enemy; they have direct access to the audiences you need to reach. Rather than avoiding media, use them as a conduit to communicate key messages. Prepare a statement that includes the confirmed facts; communicate what the company is doing and provide background information.
3. **Take responsibility.** One of the more controversial tenets of crisis management is that someone involved in a crisis must be prepared to empathize, even publicly apologize, for the events that have transpired. This is different from accepting blame. Taking responsibility means communicating what an organization is doing to remedy a situation which the media and the public have believed that the organization is involved in some way or the other.
4. **Centralize information .** A company needs to move quickly to gain control over information and the resolution of the crisis. Ensure that appropriate levels of management are updated with information from a wide variety of sources (media coverage, analyst comments, competitive intelligence, managers' first-hand reports, etc.).

5. **Establish a crisis team.** Create and train the crisis team before a crisis strikes, and establish a situation room. During a crisis, when everyone goes into action, be sure the team has access to the highest levels of management.
6. **"Plan for the worst; hope for the best."** Assume the worst-case scenario. Develop contingencies for the hours and days ahead, forecast possible consequences and determine plans of action.
7. **Communicate with employees .** Remember that employees are your front-line "ambassadors" in a crisis. Be sure they are aware of what the company is doing to deal with the situation.
8. **Use third parties to speak on your behalf .** Third parties act as character witnesses and often carry more credibility than the organization at the centre of a crisis.
9. **Use research to determine responses.** Polling, market research and focus groups provide essential insight into the magnitude of a crisis and public attitudes about where hidden issues may lie. Monitor the Internet, chat rooms and blogs.
10. **Recognize and respond to Whistle blowers.** Recognize and respond to the sounds and signals of whistle blowers within the organization or external environment. Understand, analyze and accept realities before the latent issues convert into problems and blow out of proportions. Remember, when it happens, it happens too quickly and goes out of reach too swiftly.
11. **Prevent and Prepare.** Take all measures to prevent further devastations of situations. Apparently small issues may have snow balling effect and become larger and larger as they roll down the hill, if left unattended and not stalled. Rapid action with real time solution will help greatly. Acting a proactive mode in a reactive phase can stop and mitigate the adverse effects.
12. **Create access points for information.** If circumstances warrant, create a website to give quick, up-to-the-minute information and get the company's story out. In appropriate cases, even creating help desks at points of need is worth its while to respond to the communication needs of stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese expression for crisis, *wei ji* , is a combination of two words: danger and opportunity, and it applies aptly in all situations and more so the current times. While no company would willingly submit itself to the dangers inherent in a crisis, the company that weathers a crisis well understands that an opportunity can come out of an adversity. A well managed crisis response, coupled with an effective recovery program, will leave stakeholders with a favourable impression and renewed confidence in the affected company. 5

In the case of crises emerging from external environment beyond the control of organization, the role of communicators within is even more crucial to understand the realities and respond with integrated programmes. On the other hand, to handle the larger crises in the economy such as the

one that we are facing now, concerted efforts by multiple organizations including the government authorities and collective bodies are required. Even the communication must be crafted and designed as to provide true picture of the situation and also convincing logic of corrective action and programmes initiated. The role of mass communicators in such situation is no different from that of corporate communicators, but instead goes beyond in size and scope as it deals with a much more complex situation.

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