**CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

**SHAPING TOMORROW**

**Introduction**

Warren Buffett, an American businessman and investor who is considered one of the most successful investors in the world, said: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you will do things differently." The causes of communication crises can vary from the simplest to the most complex. A crisis can be caused by thoughtless, emotional, or misguided statements. Problems may result from a lack of an adequate response to events, a lack of courage in admitting a mistake, or an inadequate communication strategy. Or simply, a communication crisis may be caused by real and painful situations within the institution.

In any case, crisis communication must be managed appropriately. In the age of rapidly developing digital media, acquiring skills in crisis communication management is crucial. It is not always possible to avoid crisis situations, but we can anticipate them, prepare properly, and learn how to react in a timely manner. The formation of a professional crisis management team is essential, as it must be able to intervene promptly and, if necessary, rebuild the image of our institution. It is crucial to understand that every media crisis can be turned into an opportunity.

Indeed, fully understanding the media landscape is vital. We live in a 24/7 media cycle, where every individual has a megaphone through social media, radically changing the way we express ourselves today. Everyone also has the tools to manage the message through communication channels. However, in the event of a crisis, it is essential to emphasize the need for communication professionals.

**Before the crisis**

**Crisis: danger and opportunity**

In a 1959 speech, John F. Kennedy clearly stated: 'When written in Chinese, the word crisis is composed of two characters - one represents danger and the other represents opportunity.' Although it is now widely recognized that this is not the correct interpretation of the Chinese characters, President Kennedy's statement about the opportunities presented by a crisis can become significant. His words from this speech have been widely repeated in business, education, politics, and the media.

In a time of crisis, our most crucial decision is how to react. It is important to remember that we can never overlook the positive side of a crisis situation. Sometimes, it is precisely during a crisis that the world finds the necessary impetus to turn seemingly insurmountable challenges into concrete opportunities.

The following should be kept in mind, even before a crisis occurs:

* Implement preventive mechanisms, such as training courses on communication.
* Select a group of people, including a coordinator.
* Train key company figures to manage communication in crisis situations.
* Develop specific communication procedures to deal with potential crises.
* Create an appropriate internal document, a crisis manual, providing detailed guidelines for staff during critical situations.
* Prepare ready-made templates of press statements to facilitate a timely and effective response to unforeseen events.
* The role of the coordinator is significantly important, requiring the selection of a person who can competently represent the institution, especially in crisis situations.
* The press officer or spokesperson does not necessarily have to be a priest; it is crucial that corporate spokespersons are properly trained, considering crisis scenarios.
* Do not underestimate the possibility of a crisis; crisis communication requires constant preparation before a situation occurs.
* Within the Church, crises often result from specific actions such as leaving the priesthood, sexual abuse, inappropriate online behavior, financial fraud, or careless talk during sermons.

**Journalists - allies not enemies**

A key role in the pre-crisis phase is to adopt an appropriate attitude towards journalists and to ensure maximum transparency in crisis situations. A telling example is the 2019 Vatican meeting on crises, during which Valentina Alazraki gave a significant speech.

From 21 to 24 February 2019, the Vatican summit on child sexual abuse, entitled "The Protection of Minors in the Church," took place in Rome. Pope Francis summoned bishops from around the world to reflect on sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The Vatican press office stated that the aim of the meeting was to make it "absolutely clear" to the bishops how to prevent and deal with sexual abuse.

Valentina Alazraki, an experienced Vatican journalist who has worked for five pontificates over four decades, was one of the keynote speakers. She shared meaningful words and thoughts that left a deep impression on the participants. During her presentation, Alazraki emphasized the lack of communication as another form of abuse, warning the bishops that if they are not able to inform the media, the faithful, and public opinion, the scandal will increase further.

"Journalists are allies, not enemies" - these words for many bishops and journalists were very suggestive. Valentina said: "If you are against those who commit or cover up abuse, then we are on the same side. We can be allies, not enemies. We will help you find the bad apples and overcome resistance to separate them from the healthy ones. But if you do not radically decide to be on the side of children, mothers, families, civil society, you are right to be afraid of us, because we journalists, who seek the common good, will be your worst enemies."

**During the crisis**

In the context of a crisis and its related media communication, key principles emerge that, if diligently followed, significantly enhance the ability to communicate often complex situations in an orderly and transparent manner.

**Basic rules**

**Efficiency and speed**

The response to a crisis must be timely. The company must be ready to act within hours of a crisis occurring. However, we must remember that in the age of digital media, the response time to a crisis has been reduced to practically a matter of minutes. Immediate communication action helps minimize damage and prevent the spread of misinformation. Providing accurate, complete, and timely information will avoid speculation. Understanding where the crisis began is essential to deal with it in a targeted and effective manner.

**Team**

The formation of a crisis management team is imperative. This group should comprise diverse professionals, including management representatives, lawyers, communication specialists, and individuals with expertise in the specific crisis area. The group should prepare a communication plan for long-term crisis management. Crisis management does not end with the publication of the first communication.

**Communication coordinator**

In today's fast-moving media landscape, whenever a crisis occurs, it's crucial to have someone in charge of coordinating efforts. This person ensures that information is managed effectively and consistently. They make sure that our messages are clear and consistent, respond promptly to any issues, handle different communication channels like social media and press, maintain good relationships with the media, strategically plan and analyze the situation, and coordinate our team's actions internally.

**First holding statement**

The first statement to the media, known as a holding statement, aims to confirm what happened without going into details. At this early stage, we do not have all the information and are still verifying the facts. The aim is to communicate that we are aware of the incident, we are investigating the causes, and if necessary, we apologize and express our regret. We will provide additional details in the near future as they become available. This statement should be issued as soon as possible, preferably within 1-2 hours after the incident, with subsequent communication. This is why there is a need for ready-made statements, which are very useful in a time of crisis.

**Internal communication**

Internal communication is just as crucial as external communication. Employees must be informed about the situation, action plans, and their role in crisis management. Effective internal communication must include regular updates on the situation, clear guidelines on what to do, and answers to frequently asked questions. It is important that employees know where to turn for further information and support.

**Integrated communication**

During difficult situations, communication must be integrated. The same messages should appear in different forms and channels: on the Internet, social media, television, radio, the press, and in the institution's internal communications. It is about maintaining a consistent message across all communication channels. Crisis communication requires a proactive approach. It is important to remember in communication to be empathetic toward those affected by the crisis, to understand their concerns, and to respond appropriately to their needs.

**Monitoring**

Monitoring social media and traditional media is crucial during a crisis. Following the reactions of people, journalists, responding to questions and comments, and providing updates are essential components of effective communication. In the Internet age, information spreads rapidly through social media with significant impact.

**Mistakes to avoid**

**Alone**

Facing a media crisis alone exposes you to the risk of communication errors. Without the support of a specialized team, it is easy to commit missteps, disseminate incomplete or inaccurate information, and react impulsively rather than strategically. Lack of experience in crisis management can lead to disorganized and ineffective communication, which can exacerbate the situation rather than improve it.

**Always answer**

Ignoring calls from the media and journalists only generates more questions. Transparency is essential to manage a crisis effectively. The media will process the story with or without our involvement. Ignoring the situation or delaying the response can result in a loss of control over the narrative, considering the fast-moving nature of time in a crisis. The use of the "no comment" phrase should be avoided, as it can be interpreted as confirmation of guilt and an attempt to conceal information. If it is impossible to discuss certain topics, provide a brief explanation to avoid the perception of concealment of information.

**Spokesperson**

Recently, there have been changes in the approach to the role of the press officer (spokesperson) in crisis situations. Previously, every crisis required a person to be the main source of information for the media and the public. However, in today's world, due to the nature of the media, the role of the press officer (spokesperson) has been reduced, and the role of the crisis coordinator is becoming more crucial. However, the press officer still has to work with the entire team and be competently prepared. An unprepared spokesperson may not only fail to resolve one crisis situation but also create another.

**Avoiding blame and accusations**

Avoiding blaming the media or accusing them directly is crucial during crisis management. There is nothing worse for journalists than being unfoundedly accused, as this can sour relations and exacerbate the situation. The media play a crucial role in informing the public and can be powerful allies if handled correctly. Instead of making accusations, it is more productive to collaborate with journalists, providing them with accurate and timely information.

**Emotions**

Allowing emotions to drive public appearances in front of the camera, injecting unnecessary emotion into written statements for the media, offending journalists, threatening legal action against them, losing control of emotions during press conferences, and displaying anxious behavior—all of this runs counter to sound logic in crisis situations.

**First declaration**

The publication of a statement that is not well-prepared for the media can exacerbate the crisis. An unprofessional statement has the following characteristics: it is drafted without consultation with others; it is influenced by emotions; it accuses the media and journalists; it defends the accused and attacks the victims of the crisis situation; it does not include elements of an apology, willingness to cooperate with the competent authorities, contact with journalists, assistance to victims, transparency in communication. Such a statement can only worsen the crisis.

**Managers' mistakes**

In a crisis-stricken institution, it is crucial that management does not leave the person in crisis in charge of the institution's management or communication. In such a situation, corrective measures must be taken, including the delegation of new people to these key roles. Leaving the person subject to the crisis in these positions usually leads to further complications.

**Speed of response**

A failure to respond quickly enough to a crisis can lead to an escalation of the problem and worsen the situation. In today's world, where information spreads rapidly through social media and traditional news channels, a delay in response can contribute to the spread of misinformation, speculation, and rumors, which can further damage an institution's reputation.

**After the crisis**

**Evaluation**

The first step in the post-crisis recovery plan is to conduct a thorough analysis of the situation. This involves the collection and analysis of relevant data on the crisis, including causes, consequences, duration, scope, and stakeholders. The analysis should identify strengths and weaknesses in the organization's response, along with future opportunities and threats. The existing communication strategy (internal and external) should be examined, making changes if necessary to make it more precise and modern. Additionally, it should be checked whether the templates for statements prepared for the media worked and how the coordinator performed his tasks.

**Training**

Reviewing training for crisis communication managers is a crucial step that requires calm and attention. It is important to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the training and make any updates or changes according to new challenges and trends in the field of crisis communication. Training on digital transformation and tools related to artificial intelligence is very important.

**Internal communication**

Maintaining and consolidating adequate internal communication about the institution is crucial, especially focusing on the post-crisis situation. After the crisis has been managed and resolved, it is important to continue to inform and involve staff in the evolution of the situation, the actions taken, and the results achieved.

**Personnel and legal issues**

If necessary, make appropriate changes to the personnel of the institution. Attention must also be paid to the procedures and completion of all matters relating to State and Church laws.

**Conclusion**

Managing communication in crisis situations requires professionalism and the involvement of many people. In times of so-called 'normality,' with no crisis in progress, it is important to prepare for future crisis situations, which will certainly arise. It is essential to gain experience in digital and traditional media, establish contacts with journalists, and understand the principles and mistakes of crisis communication. After a crisis, it is necessary to assess the situation, draw conclusions, and make the necessary decisions based on the experience gained.

Crisis situations can be likened to the wind. For those who find crisis communication difficult, these moments are like trying to stop and contain the wind in a bucket. However, crisis professionals understand the nature of the wind, appreciate its speed, gusts, force, unpredictability, and impact on their surroundings. They know that, like the wind, a crisis situation can unexpectedly change direction, gain strength, and disrupt everything in its path. Crisis communication specialists understand that sooner or later, the wind will come, and they are prepared for such situations.

We should certainly continue to learn how to reach people through the media during crisis situations, even if it's not an easy task. However, the crux of the matter is that we need to take an extremely proactive approach to crises. As Pope Francis often stressed, a crisis can be seen as an opportunity to innovate and take new and meaningful action. Facing a crisis requires courage and determination, but it can also be a moment when new solutions and perspectives emerge. It is important to remember that we never emerge from a crisis unchanged: we can come out better or worse, depending on the actions we take. Therefore, it is crucial to face crises wisely, learn from them, and grow as individuals and organizations.

Maciej Makula SDB