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Crisis Communication: It's How You Tell 'Em

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IESE Insight

History shows that even a momentary crisis can bring down a government, a company or any other type of organization. No matter how well an institution may have conducted itself in the past, a serious incident, however isolated, can soon discredit it.

To guard against this eventuality, organizations must be prepared to manage any kind of crisis, by finding solutions and by reporting what has happened. IESE Professor Jaume Ribera and Lecturer Magdalena Rosenmöller point out in the technical note "Risk Management: Communication in Times of Crisis", managing public reaction to news of a crisis can be more difficult than managing the crisis itself.

To begin, in any risk situation there are certain factors that will heighten the sense of outrage felt by the general public or certain groups in society. Events caused by human agency, or that are unpredictable or simply catastrophic, prompt a more intense reaction. The perceived injustice or moral relevance of the risk will add to the indignation. But as the authors indicate, there are other, less obvious factors. For one thing, the risk should not be announced by a spokesperson whom people do not already know and trust. Unnecessary technicalities and insensitive remarks should also be avoided.

Ribera and Rosenmöller's aim is to raise managers' awareness of the dilemmas they are likely to encounter when planning how to communicate a risk event. They stress that in any crisis situation, communication becomes complicated, since nobody knows how events will develop or how people will react.

And yet, certain types of dilemma tend to recur and so should be understood in advance. For example, management will have to choose between openness or secrecy, speculation or refusal to speculate, and centralized or decentralized decision making. Business leaders will have to decide whether to be apologetic and defensive, what the authors call "planning for denial" and "planning for panic." They will also have to position themselves with respect to the extremes of any dilemma. And in some cases, they will have to take steps to counteract the natural tendency toward one extreme or the other. Politicians, for example, tend toward secrecy, so there has to be pressure for greater openness in order to reach a satisfactory compromise. The authors suggest that the best approach is perhaps to disclose enough information for the audience to react positively, but without revealing unconfirmed reports that may be confusing.

Squarely facing dilemmas is necessary, but probably not enough. The authors further recommend creating "message maps." In a message map, ideas are grouped clearly and concisely and are based on consensus, providing a road map of planned responses to issues that may concern public opinion.

There are two ways of creating a message map. The bottom-up method identifies the concerns arising from a crisis and tries to decide who is most likely to identify with them. The top-down approach first identifies the people affected by the crisis and then looks for ways to address their specific concerns. In both cases, the list of concerns will have to be fine-tuned and reduced to a manageable size. Furthermore, the actual concerns of each group involved may be inferred from newspaper articles, web sites of associations, or interviews, for example.

Once those involved and their concerns have been identified, appropriate messages must be formulated to address each one. The authors suggest that the best way to formulate a response is by considering, in each case, what people most need to know, what they most want to know and what they are most concerned about. The goal is to create a key message for each concern, either in a few words or in a complete sentence. It should be borne in mind that when people are angry or stressed, they may experience what is known as "mental noise," which prevents them from hearing, understanding or remembering information. In such cases, the authors' recommendation is to keep the number of messages to no more than three and to repeat each one three times. It's the old rule: "Tell your audience what you are going to say, say it, and then tell them what you have just said."

Lastly, the authors recommend preparing a series of arguments or proofs to support the message map. Although this information may not be needed, it is worth having in case the message is questioned. At the same time, it is always wise to take precautions and to rehearse the message beforehand by presenting it to experts and what the authors call "substitute target audiences."

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