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TALKING POINTS

Employees — The lost stakeholders in a crisis

By Andrea Obston

“Let’s hold a press conference.” “Let’s call in the board.” “Did anyone tell the suppliers?” Those are the cries of an all-hands-on-deck response to a crisis. What’s often missing from those calls to action, however, is “How do we tell the employees?”

Your employees are your best community ambassadors. They are the people with the biggest stake in whether your company lives or dies. Who better to carry the message about the inherent good you provide every day?



Who better to remind the world why a crisis won’t derail your mission? And who, most of all, will personally grieve over the impact on your reputation when a crisis hits?

This employee grieving process hit me hard during the latest crisis we handled. As the press camped outside our window, unfurling their live satellite dishes like ominous balloons, we were literally hunkered down behind the blinds in my client’s office.

Phones were ringing at the front desk as employees did their best to sooth panicked customers. In the halls, those same employees were struggling to deal with nervous customers who were troubled by the revelations on their morning newscasts.

The only port in that storm was our “war room” where we’d set up laptops, cell phones

and TVs. And that’s where the employees took refuge. They were shocked by the apparent misdeeds of an employee they knew and respected. They were exhausted from dealing with worried customers, and they were embarrassed to be associated with their employer.

While this is an extreme example, I think it tells us that employees must be informed, supported and nurtured when a company is under assault. And this needs to happen before, during, and after a crisis. Here are a few strategies:

1. Treat employees as your most important stakeholders when you plan for a crisis before it happens, and when you’re fighting a crisis while it’s happening.

2. Distribute a media and social media procedure memo as your first step in any crisis. For traditional media, this memo makes it crystal clear how you want them to handle reporters or bloggers. It directs employees to send all media calls to one person. And it cautions them not to speak to any member of the media, even if they know them personally. The memo includes a phrase that they can use when dealing with these requests. It provides an alternative to the ever-damaging “They told me not to talk to you,” comment. This does nothing for your on-going relationship with the media. Instead we suggest: “We have someone who is handling these calls. Here is her contact information. Give me yours too and I’ll send it along to her.”

- For social media, this memo gives employees guidance on how you would like them to deal with the crises via their personal online presence. In most cases, we request that employees refrain from talking about the crisis on any social media platform. Note that you can’t legally bar them from doing this. But

you can explain why it’s best for the company if they refrain from speaking about it online.

3. Post all materials you send to stakeholders in a central location (i.e. your intranet) that employees can access. These could include press releases, fact sheets or letters to customers or those affected by the crisis. Let employees know when you’ve updated those materials.

4. Allow your employees to vent. Any employee who cares about where they work will feel personally assaulted by a crisis. Managers have to allow employees to vent those feelings. We often suggest that managers conduct both formal and informal sessions with employees during and after a crisis. These sessions should be both informative (what happened, what we did, what we’ll do and what it means to you) as well as conversational.

5. Give employees a role in recovery. When crises hit, you’re the firefighter. Resist the temptation to think that you’re done once the fire’s out. Your post-crisis actions will be critical to recovery. That’s when it’s time to take back your reputation with the support and help of your employees. Establish and articulate an aggressive effort to recapture your reputation and give your employees a role in it. It will empower them to take back what the company lost and to feel pride in it again.

The great and philosophical ad man David Ogilvy once said, “Our company’s greatest asset goes down the elevator every night.” Make sure you include those assets in dealing with, and recovering from, a crisis. ■

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