
Peer-Reviewed Article

Crisis Communication in a Career School Setting

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Abstract: Adopting a business communication model, especially in crisis situations, ensures the instructor responds in a manner that provides the appropriate information, support, and guidance, while encouraging further communication. Thus, as the student works through the crisis, they learn appropriate communication skills, new life management models, and develop new support structures. These new learning models hone skills all good workers must have in a professional environment; appropriate communication, compassion, understanding, and empathy.

Keywords: crisis communication, online learning, crises, education support, business communication.

Communication is the heart of any educational experience. Whether that experience is at a structured, traditional brick-and-mortar school or in a more flexible online environment, good communication is a critical component of successful education. The instructor must communicate the material in a way that promotes student understanding and mastery; students must communicate how they understand this material and demonstrate their own mastery.

In the online environment, communication is even more critical because large pieces of the communication process are missing. Without the unconscious cues of body language, tone, and vocal inflections, miscommunication is easy. To compensate for this, the online educator must be even more willing to listen, interact, and communicate expectations and information as clearly as possible with a student, who does not have the benefit of face-to-face interaction.

With this in mind, students must demonstrate their knowledge in a limiting environment, and instructors must interpret these demonstrations to evaluate student mastery despite these limitations. How are they engaging the material? What makes sense and what doesn't? How does this relate to the student and their lives?

Instructors cannot answer these questions: they must wait, instead, for the student to show them. For online instructors, this could mean waiting in vain for a student who will not respond. More often, instructors are tasked with responding appropriately to the students who do initiate contact. The instructor's response to student communication sets the stage for future interactions, and contributes to a student's success or failure.

Each student has a unique background, personal experience and emotional make-up, requiring a higher level of empathy from instructors for effective communication in the online environment than might be necessary for those who teach on ground. The instructor must read between the lines, interpreting the needs of the student even if they are poorly expressed, and to some extent "fill in the blanks" when students do not tell the entire story. Students coming from

backgrounds of trauma, injury, or chronic illness may need special communication and support; such communication is critical to ensure the student's success in their education.

As in education, communication plays a critical role in corporate and business risk management. Corporate crisis communication is an important aspect of risk-management in America today. Successful organizations recognize that appropriate communication in crisis situations makes the difference between profit and loss, or triumph and failure. Exemplary communication practices create opportunities for positive impressions, shaping a company's image as a responsible member of the community.

The communication required in crisis is well-defined, planned in advance, and requires the company pay attention to the public response, and how their communications affect both the flow of information and public perception of the organization as a whole. As such, communication plans are detailed and follow a specific formula. This formula shows the organization in a positive light, disseminates the information necessary for the public to appropriately grasp the situation, and attempts to shape the perception of the company as a whole during the crisis.

In 1982, persons unknown laced Tylenol-brand painkillers with cyanide. Six people died due to cyanide poisoning before the contamination was found (University of Oklahoma, 2018). The steps Johnson & Johnson developed to deal with this crisis may be considered a blueprint for establishing effective crisis communication today, and the case is studied in business schools across the country (Hilberg, n.d.).

Before the crisis, Johnson & Johnson had no public relations office; they initially learned of the contamination through a reporter requesting more information (University of Oklahoma, 2018). The company could have ignored the problem, or treated it as an isolated incident undeserving of their attention. However, the leadership of Johnson & Johnson, guided by the company credo and their ethical awareness, felt responsible to respond to the poisoning and take responsibility for any liability they might have as part of this incident (Hilberg, n.d.).

As a result of this decision, Johnson & Johnson pulled all Tylenol product off the shelves in the entire United States, rather than limiting it to the Chicago area where the outbreak originated, as was originally considered (Hilberg, n.d.). Through a series of company communications, including establishment of a 1-800 informational line for consumers, press releases, a media information line, daily statements and updates, and appearances by CEO Jim Burke on 60 Minutes and the Donahue Show, the company kept stakeholders and concerned consumers informed (University of Oklahoma, 2018). Johnson & Johnson expressed their sadness for the situation, disseminated the information they had available on an ongoing basis, and expressed their willingness to earn back the public's trust at any cost (University of Oklahoma, 2018).

These drastic measures included reimagining the Tylenol packaging to include more safety features; the "triple safety seal" of a glued box, plastic seals on the bottles, and an aluminum sear over the mouth of the bottle, visibly showing the consumer the product was not tampered with (University of Oklahoma, 2018). When Tylenol was reintroduced to the public

several months later with the newly-developed safety features, market share soared from 35 to 47%; a radical improvement considering product efficacy was unchanged (Hilberg, n.d.).

While the Tylenol case is a macro example, the basic principles apply to all crisis communications, whether large or small. In a crisis communication, transparency is key; yet respect for the victims, the investigatory process, and other stakeholders requires care and compassion (Davenport, 2018). Thus, the main formula of these communications is important and should be strictly adhered to.

There are four basic stages of crisis communication: acknowledging the problem, expressing the appropriate regret/remorse/sadness depending on the circumstances, responding with the appropriate information, and offer information on where the public can go for more information or assistance (Institute for PR, 2007). This formula can be seen in any press conference on national news stations. If done correctly, the organizations involved limit their liabilities, gain public sympathies, and provide information the public requires to respond to the circumstances involved.

These corporate formulae deal with aspects of communication the academic community, with its primary focus on imparting educational information, has not. Academic communication, especially online communication, would benefit from implementing some form of these processes. Career schools, particularly, may profit from implementing a communication plan considering the specific life-management needs of their student population, focusing on responding to the particular crises this population encounters in their daily lives. As the main point of contact, online instructors, particularly, should plan how they intend to handle student crisis communications.

Business crisis communication models can only go so far in an online educational setting because the desired outcome is slightly different. Businesses are communicating information with the purpose of informing people, the person receiving the information is under no obligation to respond or interact with the business directly, and while response is planned for, it is not necessarily expected. However, academic communication, or any communication in a learning environment, requires interaction and response from all parties, for reasons noted above. Instructors want their students to respond, and their communication should encourage that, particularly in crisis situations.

Crisis communication takes many forms. The term “crisis” conjures a specific image of what that entails; hospitalization, traumatic accident, criminal abuse, etc., are generally considered “crisis” situations. However, because the non-traditional student has more demands on their time in the form of families and employment, the crisis may not be what one would normally consider “serious”; a child’s illness, for instance, may entail a crisis.

Online students also face challenges of time management; as the online environment has very few concrete demands on their time (“attend classes at this time”) and the student is often tempted to put off schoolwork to attend to the ‘crisis’ in front of them. This causes tremendous anxiety and a sense of crisis in the student; students with weak life-management skills may

believe they have ‘failed’, and may react out of a sense of failure, creating a self-destructive cycle.

Strong communication from their instructor helps pull the student out of this crisis cycle, reassuring them of their potential for success, and modeling new, healthier communication models.

Thus, business crisis communication plans may be adapted as follows for use in academic instructor/student communication; acknowledging the problem, expressing an appropriate emotional response (sadness, grief, happiness, etc.), offer the information needed/requested, and extend an offer of more assistance, whether through inviting further contact or by referring the student to outside resources they can access.

Because career student populations have fewer role models for life-management and academic skills, it is important the instructor remember the student’s “small” issue (“I had a bad day and couldn’t complete my work”) is quite large in the student’s perception. Empathetically acknowledging their problem encourages the student to continue communicating, and teaches them how to react or respond in the future, building trust that the instructor is aware of their situation, and will offer appropriate levels of support.

Acknowledging the student’s problem, however insignificant it might seem, may appear to be common sense; however, as instructors, it is easy to become complacent with the issues experienced by students on various occasions. It is difficult to remember that a piece of late work is traumatic for a student with little/poor academic experience, and to respond with guidance and understanding.

The student must receive clear instructions on what to expect, and what their role is in either correcting the situation or succeeding in the class. This instruction could be as simple as “I will accept your late work until...” or as complex as outlining study guides and resources available to assist them. Generally, this information may be created ahead of time and easily inserted into a student communication. Information on deadlines, penalties, and other classroom information should be clear and concise, again acknowledging the student’s particular circumstances, consistent throughout the course and all written communication.

It is important to offer more assistance in a form that encourages the student to continue to communicate; whether the student actually does or not, they know the offer is still there, and will remember that in the future when other situations arise. Thus, something like “Please tell me how I can help” is less engaging than “Do you have any other questions?”

The first, (“Please tell me how I can help”) leaves the decision for further contact on the student; most students will choose not to continue communication. However, asking the student open-ended questions on how to assist them (“How can I help you?”) invites the student to continue the conversation. Successful communication depends on the continuing interaction between students and instructors; thus, all communication should end with an active invitation to further discussion and interaction.

Often, when invited to continue communication, the student will continue, even if it is just a short, “No, thank you - this answers my questions.” However, some students will respond with even more questions or situations to the instructor’s prompting. These may be related to educational topics, or they may be related to life management issues; either way, the instructor has the opportunity to respond in a compassionate way, empathizing with the student and modeling life-management and superior academic skills to those who may need it.

Further, the instructor has an opportunity to establish trust with the student, and encourage them to trust their own abilities and decision-making skills. This often takes the form of reassuring the student the guidelines the instructor sets forth can be trusted. Students may ask for the same instructions several times, unable to process that the guidance they received holds true in each circumstance. Consistency of message is critical in these situations.

As instructors, communication defines our success in the classroom, whether online or traditional. Rethinking our communication models, specifically in crisis situations, is critical to student success in the online environment, especially among high-risk populations where life management and superior academic skills must be developed for student success. The instructor’s ability to model proper communication, strong life-management, and compassionate support provides a framework the student can build upon, not only in their career, but also in personal and community settings.

Adopting a business communication model, especially in crisis situations, ensures the instructor responds in a manner that provides the appropriate information, support, and guidance, while encouraging further communication. Thus, as the student works through the crisis, they learn appropriate communication skills, new life management models, and develops new support structures. These new learning models hone skills all good workers must have in a professional environment; appropriate communication, compassion, understanding, and empathy.

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