

## CORPORATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION: LESSONS FROM SHAKESPEARE

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### ABSTRACT

*One of the most unnerving things which any manager can face in an organization is dealing with a crisis. A crisis is like a problem which does not need a passport and can visit an organization without warning and at the most inconvenient time. Handling a crisis effectively is therefore one of the fundamental skills which managers (from the lowest to the highest rungs) should possess in order to make their lives as tension free as possible. The study looks at lessons in corporate crisis communications from two perspectives. It first looks at Mark Antony's speech in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and analyses the lessons in crisis communications which can be learnt from the Bard. The study then moves to recent times and looks at the ways two corporations in handled crises they faced and draws parallels from Antony's speech which are of relevance to them. Their approach tested their skills in the area of crisis communications to the hilt and it is to their credit that they came out successfully. The interesting fact the study brings out is that Shakespeare, over more than 400 years ago, foresaw what would be equally important in today's corporate world.*

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## DEFINING CRISIS

Crisis is an unstable situation of extreme danger or difficulty. It indicates a turning-point, usually a deterioration of a situation (*WHO, 2004*). A crisis is any natural, accidental or intentional event that severely impacts people, property, and/or the environment (*CCPS-AICE, 2005*). Crisis is a threatening situation that poses the risk of escalating in intensity, falling under close media or government scrutiny, interfering with normal operations, jeopardizing organizational image, and damaging a company's bottom line (*Fink, 1986*). Crises affect people's lives and if an organization's livelihood is at stake, so are those of its employees (*Wilson, 2002*). Organizational crises are highly ambiguous situations where causes and effects are unknown and where events, though they have a low probability of occurrence, nonetheless pose a major threat to the survival of the organization (*Segars, 2003*).

## IMPORTANCE OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Crisis communication is that the communicating organization is experiencing an unexpected crisis and must respond (*CDC, 2002*). Crisis communication separates the judgment or reputation factors in the communication and deals primarily with factual communication by an involved organization to its stakeholders and the public (*CDC, 2002*).

Regardless of how a company responds to a crisis, the fact remains that the company is still perceived as incompetent by virtue of the possibility that they may have caused harm (*Uhlmann, Newman, Brescoll, Galinsky, Diermeier*). Controlling the opening moments of a crisis is crucial for any business. Initial responses often reveal whether businesses are able to manage unexpected events that may jeopardize the long-term future of their activities (*Hichri, 2010*). Communication challenges are exacerbated during a crisis when time is short, decisions are urgent, information limited, and our opportunities for the rich interaction we require are constrained (*Chandler, Wallace, Fienberg, 2007*). Crises have the potential to disrupt or destroy normal operational processes, cause financial harm, damage reputations, and threaten personal safety. For an enterprise, a crisis can put at risk the continued existence of the business itself. These dangers make it essential that an organization be prepared for crisis communication well before a crisis ever occurs (*Chandler, Wallace, Fienberg, 2007*). A latent public outside an

organization can become an active public who applies social pressure that influences an organization's stance in a crisis (Hwang, 2008). Negative consumer rumors are believed to have the potential to devastate a company's sales, market share, reputation, and relations with customers and suppliers (Steele, Smith and McBroom, 1999). Communication messages in organizational crises are highly strategic in conveying the well being and future direction of an enterprise and have become even more visible with the advent of the internet (Segars, 2003). Effective communication is a "resource multiplier" during a crisis, disaster, or emergency. Many of the expected harmful individual and community behaviors can be mitigated with effective crisis and emergency risk communication (CDC, 2002). It's impossible to prevent all loose talk by employees or secure every print or digital document, so major companies should prepare for an unintended and potentially embarrassing release, including assessing risks, conducting tabletop scenario exercises, and creating plans that companies can turn to for managing, the fallout from the release of internal documents (IOFM, 2011). A crisis has the potential to negatively impact the reputation and the bottom-line of an organization. Consequently, planning what an organization will do before an emergency occurs can mean the difference between protecting and maintaining integrity of a company and its brand or compromising your corporate reputation and jeopardizing the business operations (Marsh, Robbins, 2004). All of a company's communications, whether crisis or corporate, should be part of a long-term strategy designed to maintain everything it works so hard to achieve in terms of image and reputation (Hichri, 2010).

## SHAKESPEAREAN LESSONS IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

This study will now look at Mark Antony's speech from Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar* and see how it fits in into the ambit of crisis management, and more specifically, communicating during crises. For the record the play was written in 1599 and so we are looking back over our shoulders at management concepts which were referred to over 400 years ago. Antony's speech comes soon after Brutus has addressed the Roman populace after the killing of Caesar; Brutus has convinced them that what was done was in the best interests of everyone. The country is now in the throes of a major crisis and Antony's primary task is to bring back the populace to his side and against the conspirators.

*This is Lesson One of a crisis management program – win over the people affected by the crisis.*

Antony however, has a major problem. Brutus has agreed to let him speak only if he does not say anything negative about the conspirators. On top of a crisis, he is therefore hampered by the fact that he cannot openly address his audience in terms of what he wants to say. What he therefore does is unique. He resorts to a model of rhetorical brilliance using verbal irony as the chief prop to get his message across. For example, Brutus in his speech had used the word ‘honorable’ four times. Antony uses it ten times and his irony becomes more and more blatant:

*‘When that the poor have cried, Cæsar hath wept; Ambition should be made of sterner stuff: Yet Brutus says he was ambitious; and Brutus is an honourable man.’*

With this drumbeat, Antony pulls the crowd to his side and they realize that there was no justification for killing Caesar, which naturally means that the murder was an unpardonable act. This speech is therefore a classical treatise on verbal irony. For the record, the other type of irony is Socratic irony where the questioner asks seemingly innocent questions which ultimately trap the speaker and makes him realize the mistakes being made. Antony does not use this form in his speech as the questions he asks are more rhetorical in nature than anything else.

Irony, as it is interpreted today is about having the actual meaning of the words (written or spoken) turn out to be the opposite of their literal meaning. Antony uses irony to negate the meaning of “honor” and “honorable” as it applies to Caesar’s murderers, using verbal daggers to repeatedly stab Brutus’s reputation. His speech is aimed at bringing the Romans to boiling point and leads them to revenge and murder. It works.

*This is **Lesson Two** of crisis management – use communication skills which are appropriate for the occasion.*

The next thing Antony does is appeal to the passions of the listeners. He very cleverly brings in the fact that Caesar three times refused the crown when it was first presented to him – Antony is now blatantly pulling at the heartstrings of the listeners:

*‘I thrice presented him a kingly crown, which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition? Yet Brutus says he was ambitious; and, sure, he is an honourable man. I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke, but here I am to speak what I do know. You all did love him once, not without cause.’*

Antony is telling the listeners that not only did Caesar care for them, but at the same time he was also without pride and ambition to be sitting on the throne. He continues to dispute Caesar's ambitiousness, but at the same time maintains that the conspirators were honorable men. This is a universal remedy; in any crisis, an appeal to the hearts, if made in a sophisticated way, can be very effective.

*This is Lesson Three of managing a crisis – appeal to the passions of the listeners and communicate what will pull them to your side.*

In any crisis, it is important that person who is trying to resolve it, makes what he or she is saying abundantly clear to the listener. In moments of agitation, human nature is such that people tend to latch on to words and phrases which need not necessarily connect with the problem at hand. This in turn then leads to a misinterpretation of the situation, adding more fuel to the existing fire. People tend to focus on irrelevancies and then an already muddled situation becomes more muddled. The possible way to avoid this is to emphasize words and phrases more than once.

In the speech, Antony uses the same idea frequently but rephrases it slightly each time. He also uses what is called the Rule of Three, which means that words (or words with the same meaning) are repeated three times. The opening line of the speech is a typical example of this.

*This is Lesson Four of containing a crisis – communicate your meaning clearly through repetition.*

In the speech, Antony also makes use of drama in order to win the populace over to his side. This is seen where he says:

*'Bear with me; my heart is in the coffin there with Caesar, and I must pause till it come back to me.'*

The actor has to pause dramatically after delivering these lines so that the full effect sinks into his listeners. In actual fact, Antony is giving time for the crowd to make up their minds if they are with him or not. This is a strategic move as it also gives Antony time to figure out the way forward from then on. Should he go back to the use of irony or should he appeal more to the

emotions or should he leave things as they are if he senses the crowd is on his side? This same use of drama is seen when he reveals the existence of Caesar's will. He is working on the curiosity of the audience and milks as much drama out of this incident as possible. He says (referring to the will):

*'I have o'ershot myself to tell you of it. I fear I wrong the honourable men whose daggers have stabb'd Caesar; I do fear it.'*

The crowd is now fully on his side. One of the listeners shouts, 'They were traitors' and contemptuously says 'Honorable men!'

These two events in the speech – the dramatic pause and the showing of the will are carefully crafted and brought out by Antony at the appropriate time. Which brings us to the next step of handling a crisis?

***Lesson Five – make use of the power of dramatics to win over your audience.***

Overall, Antony has, after the speech, completely succeeded in his intentions and brought the crowd round to his way of thinking. He has turned the tide of public opinion against Brutus, Cassius, and their compatriots - and has laid the foundations for the defeat of the conspirators at the end of the play.

The five step process described above is not sequential. The essence of crisis management is that the person trying to resolve the crisis has to be adaptable to the changing moods and perceptions of the listeners. The sequence of the steps will therefore depend on the situation. Shakespeare's greatness lies in recognizing this but not overtly telling this in Antony's speech. He leaves the speech to make its overarching impact and its success lies in the fact that the populace has gone through a 180 degree turnaround at the end of it.

Perhaps the use of verbal irony which we referred to earlier is the most effective; the danger lies that it may boomerang on the speaker if not skilfully handled. But irony is as old as the hills. The first mention of the word in English is in 1502: 'yronye ... by the whiche a man sayth one & gyveth to understande the contrarye.'" Verbal irony is what is called a trope, which is derived from the Greek for turn, since it is a figure of speech that turns or changes the meaning of a word

away from its literal meaning (like metaphor). The very fact that the word has been around for long is a sign of its efficacy.

The speech can also be analyzed on a different paradigm than the one detailed above. This is at a more macro level and looks at it in terms of its intellectual appeal and rational appeal (as distinct from the emotional appeal which has already been addressed). The intellectual appeal is hit right at the beginning when Antony says:

*'I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones; So let it be with Caesar.'*

The rational appeal comes later in the speech:

*'I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke, but here I am to speak what I do know. You all did love him once, not without cause: What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?'*

It will be observed that the appeal made by Antony using the second paradigm is equally effective. What emerges is that the approach which Shakespeare uses when his characters are communicating something critical is to make them speak at multiple levels and planes. However, Shakespeare's characters were master communicators and not just in times of a crisis. The greatness of the Bard lies in the fact that he seamlessly and effortlessly integrates the different paradigms and planes so that the listener is unaware of the technical skills that have gone into the actual 'construction' of the speeches.

The analysis made in the foregoing paragraphs is an attempt to take a glimpse behind the scenes and try and understand the complexity behind the simplicity. As Mathew Arnold summed it when he referred to Shakespeare – 'Others abide our question. Thou art free.'

## **ANALYSIS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION LESSONS IN CORPORATE PERSPECTIVE**

We shall now look at applicability of these lessons from a corporate perspective. We are essentially focusing on two companies i.e. Domino's and Cadbury. Not so long ago Domino's was taken aback by a rude surprise by two of its employees. On an Easter Sunday, in a small

town in North Carolina, two employees shot a video of themselves in a store doing shocking unsanitary and unhygienic things with the food. The video showed one of its employees sticking cheese inside his nose and then putting it back into the sandwich. His colleague also did similar gross unthinkable vulgar acts with the food. Then they uploaded these videos on You Tube, which immediately became viral. The company faced a 'crisis' considering that Domino's was in the business of food where trust erosion amongst consensus could mean immediate doom for the company. Two irresponsible employees with their irresponsible and intentional act threatened to ruin the show for hundreds of others who worked day and night to make Domino's a choice of millions of customers worldwide.

Another company which faced a different sort of but equally compelling crisis is Cadbury. In October 2003, the food and drug administration received complaints about worm infestation in two bars of Cadbury Dairy Milk, the flagship brand of Cadbury India. An enquiry was ordered and the information became public. Over the weeks that followed the media was rife with news and all kinds of allegations, opinions filled the space. The sales dropped sharply and considering that it was the Diwali (festival of lights in India) the company took a major hit in terms of sales. The company had a challenge of convincing the public especially the customers that worm infestation cannot happen at manufacturing stage and that it is just a bad storage problem at a retailer level without upsetting the distribution channel at the same time. Additionally it had to lift the sagging morale of the sales force.

#### ***Lesson one – win over the people affected by the crisis***

People are right to feel fearful in a crisis. A fearless public that leaves you alone to manage the problem is not achievable (*Sandman, Lanar, 2004*). Winning over the people affected by crisis is one of the toughest jobs considering the stake on trust. A good corporate citizen knows that the most effective way to quell a volatile situation is to communicate with the public as completely and accurately as possible (*Ressler, 2001*). Instead of leaving people alone with their fears, help them bear their fears by legitimizing them, and even sharing some of your own (*Sandman, Lanar, 2004*).



In the case of Domino's, once it learned about the video from the readers of 'The Consumerist', they responded quickly and targeted audiences that already viewed the video. The company's President gave a YouTube response as a damage-control exercise.

Cadbury's Managing Director addressed consumer's concerns and a key part of the MD's message focused on how infestation is storage linked problem. The company reportedly spent close to INR 150 million on machine imports to revamp packaging changing into metallic polyflow double-wrapping to thereby reduce chances of any infestation. To communicate this huge initiative, Cadbury chose the legendry Indian movie star Amitabh Bachchan whose values would synergize with those that the company stood for.

***Lesson Two– use communication skills which are appropriate for the occasion.***

Each crisis will carry its own psychological baggage. The practitioner must anticipate what mental stresses the population will be experiencing and apply appropriate risk communication strategies to attempt to manage these stresses in the population (CDC, 2002). Considering that most of the target group in case of the Domino's incident are net-savvy, Domino's chose the net as the main medium of communication. The Internet as a communications medium has the ability to instantaneously distribute information to a mass audience at low-cost and provides a powerful basis for Internet Crisis Potential (ICP) when stakeholders negatively affect the reputation of a corporation and/or its brands (Conway, Ward, Lewis, Bernhardt, 2007). Since Domino's did not have a twitter account, it immediately launched one and recognizing the fact that many employees might already be having a twitter account, Domino's encouraged its employees to tweet. Domino's also ensured that the videos were removed from the You Tube to significantly lower the number of people who would watch these videos. The crisis management team at Domino's also took a decision to create a You Tube response instead of distributing a press release. The company understood that fact that the pass-along nature of the information online would mean a faster dissemination. Hence Domino's took a very aggressive stance to crisis communication.

Cadbury, confronted with the challenge of safe guarding its reputation cultivated a relationship of trust with media to generate good publicity for its brand. Similar to Domino's strategy, Cadbury identified the media which had done the maximum damage and chose the same media

primarily for damage-control. While in the case of Domino's it was the internet, in the case of Cadbury it was television. Hence Cadbury shot video news releases of packaging and factory and gave them to television channels, which in turn beamed them to millions. Cadbury also organized sales conferences, beaming audio-visuals with an objective of motivating the sales staff.

***Lesson Three – appeal to the passions of the listeners and communicate what will pull them to your side.***

Whenever confronted with a 'crisis', companies have a choice to take a legal route of defence or a common sense based approach and appeal to the passions of people. Professionals are understandably preoccupied with looking professional. But especially in a crisis, the best leaders reveal their humanity (*Sandman, Lanar, 2004*). A company that employed an engaged response to a crisis was evaluated more positively than a company with a defensive response or a response of no official comment, which were perceived as similarly negative (*Uhlmann, Newman, Brescoll, Galinsky, Diermeier*).

Domino's on the one hand fired those two employees who were responsible for that infamous video and charged them with 'felony'. On the other hand they appealed to their customers not to undermine the hard work and sincere efforts of hundreds and thousands of dedicated men and women working around the globe for the acts of two idiots.

Cadbury on the other hand focused on regaining the trust of its customers that it is safe to consume its chocolates. This was done by combining both the rational and emotional appeal.

***Lesson Four – communicate your meaning clearly through repetition.***

A company's response to a crisis holds major consequences not only for its social reputation, but for logically unrelated evaluations as well (*Uhlmann, Newman, Brescoll, Galinsky, Diermeier*). A vacuum of information leads to rumors and speculation (*Hartman*). Although the actual communication response steps will vary based on specific scenarios, successful short and long term communication is the result of sound communication priority setting (*Lukaszewski, 1997*).

Like in case of Domino's, although they decided on repeating their message negating the lousy video, in the following days they decided not to advertise sandwiches (shown in the videos) and featured other items instead. **As much repeating certain things is important, at times repeatedly not repeating something is also important.**

Cadbury with an objective to bring-in clarity in its message, repeated the same in many ways –

- a. The company shared the same message (audio-visuals and facts) separately with the media (editorial outreach program), with trade (through media-ads and sales force) and with customers (through media-ads).
- b. Cadbury used a combination of audio tools, print media, posters, leaflets etc. to communicate the same message.
- c. Cadbury also create communication materials in different languages considering India is a multi-lingual nation.

***Lesson Five – make use of the power of dramatics to win over your audience.***

One of the main ways people absorb new risks is by “over-reacting” at first (*Sandman, Lanar, 2004*). Organizations confronting a crisis can act and talk and are judged upon their public gestures and public words (*Hallahan, 2003*). There is an element of dramatics involved in crisis communication which is essentially symbolic and sincere. Symbolic interactionism recognizes the notion of the gesture as a fundamental element in the communication process (*Hallahan, 2003*).

Domino's for instance echoed the outrage in the general public about the video with a display of similar emotions from the company spokespersons. The company's president and other spokespersons expressed anger over two dunces trying to ruin a legacy. Domino's also symbolically closed the store and sanitized it.

As much as Domino's chalked out a strategy to counter the negative impacts of the video, they also did not disturb their normal day-to-day activities. The understanding was that the more you 'behave' normally, the quicker normalcy prevails.

Cadbury initiated 'Project Viswas' (trust building) which saw the commencement of a retail monitoring and education program (to improve storage issues) and also significant package-overhaul. As much this was genuine steps, they were also done symbolically to create an impression over the stake holders, primarily the consumers.

## CONCLUSION

The lessons in Corporate Crisis Communications are significant in not only undoing damage done by the crisis but also in preventing much of the damage from happening. And not everybody gets it right. Toyota hit with the crises of floor mats and faulty gas pedals causing shocking cases of unintended acceleration handled the crisis communication poorly. The letters that it sent to the customers were in denial self-eulogizing and reflected hollow magnanimity. The letters seemed to have been shot from a judicial correctness stand-point rather than from a practical common-sense approach.

The organizational leadership plays perhaps the most significant role in this process, both in engaging its people and also in managing the media effectively. Crisis communication is more about being honest, owning mistakes and taking concrete steps, rather than just talking and reacting. BP's ex-CEO Tony Hayward committed the same mistake sometime back. When one of the worst oil-spills happened in the Gulf of Mexico in a rig licensed to BP, Tony Hayward first shrugged off responsibility and when he later apologized, did that without empathy and compassion. The whole affair damaged BP's image and people lost trust in the company. Both Domino's and Cadbury took the crisis head-on and did not skirt the issue. In short they learnt their lessons quickly before the crisis walloped them and their brands.

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