

Module 3. Sports Public Relations and Crisis Communication

Imagine the following scenario:

Ahmad Djurat works as the Public Relations Director for a professional football franchise in Australia. Since joining the organization one year ago, Ahmad has worked very hard to protect the organization's reputation. When Ahmad first joined the organization, senior management personnel had a philosophy of no bad news, and thus, when negative incidents surfaced, the organization was quick to deny wrongdoing and elected to endure any negative public relations feedback until the incident blew over and media members moved on to another story.

Over the past year, Ahmad has worked with senior management officials to promote more transparency when things go wrong. He has used several examples from other sport organizations and athletes that admitted wrongdoing to show these management personnel the value of admitting to the issue and announcing steps the organization is taking to rectify the situation. Progress has been slow, but Ahmad has slowly started to change the philosophy.

He reflects on a recent situation where a report surfaced that a coach had engaged in an extramarital affair with one of the organization's employees. Initially, the coach and senior management personnel wanted to deny the incident, but Ahmad encouraged the coach to admit wrongdoing, express remorse and working with the organization's Human Resources Director, they created a policy on romantic relationship amongst team employees, which they showed to the media as evidence of the organization's handling of the issue.

Consequently, the organization experienced very little media coverage around the event, and the organization received a substantial number of e-mails and social media comments praising them for how they handled the situation. Ahmad also learned from one of his media contacts, that a reporter had obtained copies of text messages between the coach and the employee, and had the organization denied the incident, the reporter was prepared to print this information.

Ahmad's thoughts are interrupted by his cell phone vibrating. When he picks up his phone, he sees a message from Sheila Dubrofsky, the organization's Media Relations Director. She informs him that reports are circulating that one of the team's star athletes has just been arrested on charges of sexual assault. Ahmad immediately reports this to Geoffrey Swanson, the President of the organization.

Geoffrey tells Ahmad the organization is gathering facts and will be meeting in 30 minutes to plan strategy. During the meeting with Geoffrey and other team executives, they have learned that there is significant evidence to support the allegation of sexual assault.



Harris Johnson, the head coach argues that the player in question is the team's leading scorer, and any disciplinary action will affect the team's performance and contends that the victim is exaggerating the situation.

As Ahmad listens to this comment and other statements by team officials trying to figure out how to allow the athlete to continue playing, he is reminded of several cases where organizations that attempted to deny or minimize the seriousness of sexual assault sustained massive public relations damage. His thoughts are interrupted by Geoffrey asking Ahmad how the organization should respond to this incident.



Unit 3.1 Understanding Crisis Communication

Sports organizations, like any organization, are susceptible to crisis. Whereas an organization can plan and try to prevent crisis situations from occurring, issues will still manifest, and how an organization elects to handle these issues can significantly affect the public relations damage they sustain. Communication of crisis response in a timely manner has always been an important consideration, but in the contemporary era, where immediacy is valued by consumers, organizations must pay attention to the timeliness of their response. Yet, the pressure to get information out in an expedient manner cannot come at the expense of quality. One way that public relations professionals can enhance their ability to get information out quickly is through having a written crisis plan in place. While crisis plans must be adaptable, understanding what communication channels the organization will use for particular crises, and what narratives or strategies the organization will use in certain situation, can make tailoring the message a more efficient process. Sports public relations professionals also need to identify how they will manage relationships during crisis and determine which audiences or publics should be prioritized and how information will be disseminated to each of these groups.

A major function of crisis communication is managing the narrative around the organization to help minimize public relations damage. While the organization can perpetuate particular narratives, it is important to remember that the organization is not the only voice in the public domain. Certainly, media members can introduce narratives around the organization as can the public via social media platforms. Thus, sports public relations professionals have to be mindful of these additional narratives and factor into how the organization will address them. Yet, caution must be used here, as if the organization is perceived as trying to manipulate or censor the public, the crisis can be enflamed. In these situations, it may be advisable for the organization to focus more on refining their narrative via their media channels, rather than trying to disrupt the narratives espoused by others. Finally, after a crisis has abated, sports public relations professionals need to evaluate the crisis response and assess what worked and what could be done better in the future. Crisis response is something that cannot be static, the organization must learn from each incident and continually refine their response strategies to maximize message effectiveness and minimize reputational damage to the organization.

3.1.1 Defining Crises

Crises can take on different meanings for every organization. As organizations are unique, so are the crises they face. Although the definitions of crisis may vary, there are some common characteristics of crisis. Coombs defined a crisis as, "a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly" (2007, <https://goo.gl/lpOfPe>). Coombs also noted that crises can create three related threats for organizations: "(1) public safety; (2)

financial loss; and (3) reputation loss" (2017, <https://goo.gl/lpOfPe>). In the context of sport, Connaughton, Spengler, & Bennett (2001) suggested that crises contain the following characteristics: (a) they are often unexpected; (b) they are usually disruptive; and (c) they often lead to allegations against the organization, and usually these allegations do not take into account the whole situation. Stoldt, Miller, Ayres, & Comfort (2000) considered that a crisis could harm a sports organization's sustainability and/or standing with its publics.

Whereas crises are often unexpected for sports organizations (e.g., a player being arrested) in some cases, the crisis is to be expected. For example, a sports organization that decides to relocate to another geographical can expect reputational loss from fans and constituents in the area they are leaving. Additionally, if a sports organization decides to raise ticket prices, this action could be considered disruptive, and is likely to evoke negative reactions amongst the fan base. Finally, as another example, some sports organizations decide to endure several years of diminished success to rebuild for a more competitive future. This particular situation is likely to lead to some financial loss as attendance may diminish, which arguably should be expected, and thus, public relations professionals for this organization will need to consider how they can keep the fan base engaged and excited during this rebuilding phase. As the above scenarios show, sports organizations are at risk of crises from both anticipated and unanticipated incidents. Consequently, it is imperative that a crisis plan be in place.

3.1.2 Need for Crisis Plans

As with other areas of the organization, having a written plan in place can help organization plan for crisis and written plans can help crisis response strategies be executed more effectively. It is important to distinguish between emergency plans and crisis plans here. Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold (2006) noted that emergency plans, "delineate responses to situations such as a patron having a heart attack, a packed facility being placed under a tornado warning, or a fire occurring at a manufacturing facility" (p. 169). They noted that crisis communication plans, "offer guidance on how to proceed once a crisis has occurred" (p. 169). According to Matera and Artigue (2000) a crisis communication plan needs to involve:

- Ensuring all management staff are in a position to contain and manage a given crisis.
- Ensuring all management staff are in a position to be provided with the information they require for a swift and effective resolution of the crisis.
- All other affected people are provided with factual information about the crisis as quickly as possible. (P. 224).

Managing a crisis can be difficult, but managing it without a plan in place makes this process exceptionally challenging. A written plan can help guide execution of crisis communication and give sports public relations professionals a baseline they can work against to handle a crisis situation (understanding that every crisis is different and a plan may have to be tailored).

Crisis situations can significantly impact sports organizations reputation and written crisis communication plans can help sports public relations professional minimize the damage to the organization by giving them guidance on how to handle crises, which promote a timely response, which can generate positive publicity for the sports organization in being swift to address the issue. Remember that immediacy is an expectation of most publics now, and having a written crisis plan in place can help sports organization meet this demand, while also ensuring the response is appropriate to the situation and communicated via the correct media channels.

3.1.3 Planning for Crises

Whereas not every crisis can be planned for, sports public relations professionals can help the organization minimize its reputational damage and efficiently respond to crisis through written plans. One important part of crisis communication plans is identifying where crises are likely to occur. For example, a sports public relations professional may know that the organization is about to trade a star player who is very popular with fans. In this context, the public relations professional can plan for likely negative pushback from this public and craft strategy to minimize damage to organizational reputation. In this scenario, he/she may decide to release a tribute video thanking the player for his service to the team on the organization's YouTube page, and work with local sports journalists to determine how they might cover the story. Although it is helpful to know that a crisis situation is coming, this is not always going to be the case. Thus, it is imperative for sports public relations professionals to plan for crises that will occur with minimal notice. Here, looking at industry trends and examples can be a useful way of planning for a crisis. How have other sports organizations handled particular issues? What has been successful and what has enhanced the public relations damage? Using this data can help sports public relations professionals craft individualized organizational plans that are informed by best practices.

Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold (2006) outlined the following elements as being useful components of a crisis communication plan:

- **Crisis Scenario** - identifying the most likely scenarios the sports organization is likely to encounter and how the organization should respond.
- **Initiation of the Plan** - all involved employees must know how to initiate the plan. Additionally, contact information for all crisis



managers should be current and someone must be designated for responsibility in keeping contact information current.

- **Definition of Response Teams** - as crises will vary, different people will need to be called upon for unique crisis situations, and thus, identifying response teams for each possible scenario is important. It also is helpful to select alternates or back-ups in case a designated person is unavailable.
- **Definition of Key Publics** - the crisis communication plan will need to identify the groups of people that the crisis response team needs to communicate with and prioritizing the order in which these publics should be contacted.
- **Internal Communication Responsibilities** - here, the crisis communication plan should communicate to internal publics what has occurred and what they should be doing as a result of the crisis, as well as securing additional information that is necessary to help manage the crisis.
- **External Communication Philosophy** - just as sports organizations must communicate internally, they must do so externally. Sports organization may need to place others interests above their own (e.g., acknowledging and protecting victims) and plan in advance what the best source of information will be for the media.
- **External Communication Policies** - here the sports organization needs to determine how they will release information to the media, such as the use of initial statements. Then, the sports organization will need to determine how to communicate updates.
- **Spokesperson Identification** - determining who will be the primary spokesperson for the sports organization may vary based on the crisis, but it is important that the spokesperson be competent in public communication, including with social media and the organization will need to determine the ratio through which the spokesperson will communicate via public speaking (e.g., media interviews, press conferences) and through social media.
- **Message and Channel Identification** - sports public relations professional need to identify what messages will be used to manage the crisis and the channels best suited to communicate those messages. For example, if the sports organization is issuing an apology and showing remorse, a more public, visible media channel is more optimal to use.

Additionally, some media channels such as social media are now two-way so it is important for organization to plan for how certain messages will be received via media channels and what resistance could emerge on those channels. For instance, if an organization wants to use a hashtag to make finding information about the crisis efficient, they may need to plan for social media users taking this hashtag and using it in ways that are unfavorable to the organization.



3.1.4 Managing the Crisis Response Narrative

Planning for crisis communication helps sports public relations professionals determine the appropriate communication strategy to deploy in handling a crisis. However, disseminating the message is only half of the equation. The narrative the organization has distributed must be managed. Accordingly, sports public relations professionals need to see how the narrative is being received and use that feedback to adjust the narrative if necessary. In the past, managing the narrative was often done by assessing how sports media members and other mass media outlets were discussing the narrative. Did they support what the organization was saying? Or, did they challenge it? The answers to those questions then influence how the sports organization adapts its messaging. Perhaps the sports organization was vague in their initial response, and this has generated negative media attention such as suggesting the organization is trying to cover up, and the organization then provides more specific information to combat this narrative.

Managing the narrative has become a more complex task in the era of social media as the public has now avenues to disseminate information about the organization that can disrupt the narrative the organization has sent out. Thus, part of the crisis communication plan should include how to manage disruption of the narrative by the active social media audience. For example, some organizations have attempted to use hashtags in communicating about a crisis, and while well-intentioned, these efforts have resulted in the hashtag being hijacked and the organization sustaining further damage. Accordingly, sports public relations professionals need to be careful in their social media efforts in crisis communication. Whether via social or traditional media, if the organization's narrative is disrupted, sports public relations professionals need to be cautious of how they respond. For example, employing a strategy that is perceived as aggressive or attacking those who are saying negative things about the organization can enhance the public relations damage to the organization. In such situations, the organization may be better suited to use their own media channels to reinforce the narratives they have introduced, and introduce competing narratives to those that are challenging the organization.

Finally, sports public relations professionals need to be mindful of transparency. While the crisis response strategy may at times be made by others, sports organizations who attempt to cover-up issues or deny wrongdoing when it has occurred, face a much more difficult battle than when the organization admits wrongdoing and uses communication centered on how the organization is learning from the incident and how they plan to do better in the future. In the contemporary digital media era, it is very easy for information to come out, and sports organizations need to be mindful that controlling the narrative is much more complex and is a much more manageable process when transparency is practiced.



Unit 3.2 Crisis Response Strategies

In planning for a crisis, sports public relations professionals have to determine what strategies will be called upon to communicate to both internal and external publics. There are a variety of strategies that can be employed, and sports public relations professionals need to ensure that they use the right response strategy for the crisis. Certainly, this can be difficult, as crises vary and there are unique elements to each crisis and within each organization that can affect how they handle a crisis. In some instances, an organization may learn what crisis response strategies work best by experiencing an incident where they utilized the wrong response. That experience, besides being difficult, can be helpful in evaluating crisis response and helping the organization obtain more successful results in the future. Crisis response also involves selecting the appropriate channel for communication. Should the organization issue a press release as their sole response? Or should they issue a press release, and have the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) make a statement that is posted on the organization's social media channels? As has been discussed in the lesson, crisis situations are unique and so are the opportunities for communication channels. Accordingly, for one crisis, a certain channel may be used, but not employed in a different crisis. Having a crisis plan in place can help sports public relations professionals determine what channels are optimal for each crisis.

Communicating crisis response also involves managing relationships. How will the organization manage communication with internal publics versus external publics? What kind of information will be given to the media and who will be coordinating communication with external audiences? To what extent will the organization's own media be used to communicate to external audiences? Answers to each of these questions are important elements of a written crisis response plan and can help organizations be more effective in handling crisis, as the response strategy and communication of the response strategy have been thought out beforehand. Finally, after a crisis has dissipated, it is important for sports public relations professionals to assess the crisis response. What worked well? What could have been done differently? Crisis response, much like other aspects of sports organizations, is about getting better and refining strategy to produce optimal results. Thus, sports public relations professionals may find that their written plan needs adjustment after handling a crisis, as not all circumstances can be entirely planned for. Maintaining a reflexive approach to crisis can help sports public relations professionals cultivate effective crisis communication practices.

3.2.1 Strategies for Crisis Communication

Just as there are a variety of crises that can emerge, so too are there a diverse number of crisis communication strategies that can be called upon. The goal for sports public relations professionals is to try and match the crisis response to the situation. Coombs' theory of



situational crisis communication is a particularly useful way to determine appropriate crisis response strategy. According to this theory, the amount of reputational damage an organization can sustain dictates what strategy should be called upon (Coombs, 2006). Coombs notes that to determine the appropriate response, the crisis must be identified correctly. He labels three basic clusters of crisis: (a) victim cluster - a situation where the organization is also the victim (e.g., earthquake, rumors, pandemic); (b) accidental cluster - where unintentional actions lead to a crisis (e.g., recalls, equipment failure, toxic spill that leads to environmental damage) and (c) preventable cluster - situations where organizations knowingly placed people at risk or took in appropriate actions (e.g., management personnel violating laws, stakeholders being placed at risk with knowledge by management personnel). Coombs (2006) then notes that there three basic options for responding to the crisis: (a) establish that no crisis exists; (b) alter the attributions around the crisis event to make it appear less negative, or (c) alter how stakeholders perceive the organization, and work to repair the organization's reputation.

Coombs (2006) then positions crisis response strategies into one of three potential options: (a) Deny Response Option; (b) Diminish Response Option; and (c) Deal Response Option. As its name suggests, with the deny response options, organizations deny culpability for the crisis. Crisis response strategies here can consist of denial, attacking the accuser, or scapegoating - blaming someone else for the crisis. Whereas sports organizations should not accept blame for things they did not do, it is important to note that the deny response option can enhance public relations and reputational damage if not communicated appropriately. For example, if a sports organization is accused of an ethical violation (e.g., a college athletic department personnel trying to get student-athletes into academic courses with no work involved), if there is evidence that the organization did not commit the violation, denial can be used, but must be done with tact (e.g., acknowledging the seriousness of the allegation, how important the ethical issue is to the organization, etc.). Whereas with denying the response the organization accepts no responsibility; in the diminish response option, the organization is attempting to minimize its accountability. Here, the organization can employ strategies such as excuses, or stating the organization did not intend the crisis to happen, justification, or stating that the damage resulting from the crisis is minor. As with the deny response option, sports organizations need to be cautious with this strategy. Crises may very well occur unintentionally (e.g., a glitch in ticketing system that changes the ticket price of a game), but organization still need to show care and empathy in reducing their culpability here, as some publics can often perceive communication as being disingenuous and equate this communication as the organization not caring about them.

Unlike the previous two options, with the deal response option, the organization is taking some action to deal with the crisis. Here, organizations can use strategies such as ingratiation, or reminding stakeholders of past good works by the organization and/or praising



stakeholders, expressing concern for victims affected by the crisis, show compassion by offering gifts, or other compensation to victims, regret, or express contrition about the crisis, or apology, wherein the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks for stakeholder forgiveness. Sports organizations may be best suited, if the crisis situation warrants it, to use a deal response option. In general, these strategies are well received by publics, if communicated in authentic ways. To help you with these strategies, complete the following table, using your own organization:

Table 1: Crisis Response Strategies

Crisis Scenario	Response Option	Justification for Response Option

Source: prepared by the author.

3.2.2 Selecting the Crisis Response Channel

Once the crisis response has been selected, sports public relations professionals must determine what communicative channels will be used to communicate the response strategy. The communication channel is likely to vary based on the crisis, and as discussed earlier in the lesson, part of the written plan involves determining what channels will be used to communicate the crisis response. Regardless of the channels the sports organization uses to communicate the crisis response, it is important to understand that other entities, such as the media, will be using channels to communicate about the organization's handling of the crisis. Traditionally, sports organizations have disseminated crisis response through channels such as press releases, press conferences, and statements posted on the organization's website, while communicating crisis response to the media. In the contemporary media environment, sports organizations must now take an integrative approach to communicating crisis response. For example, as noted earlier, one of the key elements in a crisis plan is identifying a spokesperson. Once that person has been identified, it is important that their communication is consistent. In other words, if the General Manager is the spokesperson for a particular crisis, and holds a press conference to discuss how the organization is handling a crisis, the General Manager should use that same message on his/her social media platforms in talking about the crisis. Additionally, other key executives and team personnel should be trained on how their social media messaging should unfold during a crisis situation, so as they are not seen as contradicting the spokesperson. To help you plan in this area, complete the following table for your own organization:



Table 2: Crisis Response Channel Communication

Crisis Scenario	Pubic/Audience to communicate crisis response	Channel(s) used to communicate to that public/audience

Source: prepared by the author.

3.2.3 Managing Relationships During Crises

Crisis communication involves a variety of elements, each of which is important for successful execution. For example, the organization must identify the correct crisis response strategy and communicate that response over the correct communication channel. Another important factor in crisis communication involves managing relationships during crises. Sports organizations must account for how they will manage relationships during crisis situations and, as it has been discussed in the lesson, the written plan can help the organization do this effectively. Consider a scenario where a sports organization is relocating to another geographic area. Employees are likely to be concerned by this decision as it will involve relocation. How will the sports organization manage relationships with employees, understanding that some of its employees may leave the organization rather than relocate? How can the organization manage this process in ways that leave these employees with favorable views towards the organization? As another example, consider a sports organization that is raising season-ticket prices. How will relationship with season ticket holders be managed? What can the organization do to help this public maintain a positive view of the organization and minimize damage to the organization's reputation?

The crisis situation will dictate what publics need to be attended to and sports public relations professionals will need to determine the most optimal ways to manage those relationships. However, a public that is likely to be a constant presence, no matter the crisis, is the media. Thus, sports public relations professionals need to identify how the organization can work with the media through crisis situations, understanding that media coverage of the crisis and the sports organization's crisis response may not always be favorable. One potential way of managing media relationships during a crisis is to be transparent and work with the media as cooperatively as possible, to avoid allegations of cover up. This may involve making organizational personnel available to the media, making it important to ensure that these individuals have been sufficiently trained in media relations. Sports public relations professionals may also determine that while they will work with the media through a crisis, the organization will be using their own media to communicate crisis response, which may involve countering the media narrative around the organization's



response. Certainly, managing media relationships is important, but it is helpful if sports organizations have cultivated positive relationships prior to the crisis occurring, as this goodwill can be called upon to mitigate the damage to the organization's reputation. It is going to be difficult to expect publics that the sports organization has treated badly in the past to say good things about them once a crisis hits. Building positive relations with its publics prior to a crisis will be of immense benefit when sports organizations encounter crisis.

3.2.4 Evaluating Crisis Response

Once a crisis has abated, the sports organization can look at the crisis holistically and evaluate their performance. Reflection and assessment are an integral part of crisis communication as it helps sports organizations and sports public relations professionals identify strengths and weaknesses, so the organization can optimally refine its crisis communication strategy. Organizations that feel like they did everything right are often the ones that sustain issues in the future because of their unwillingness to adapt. It is also important that when sports public relations professionals assess crisis communication performance, they do so accurately. Trying to minimize what went wrong or downplay negative effects is only going to harm the organization long-term. Thus, even if it is painful or challenging, accuracy is paramount in this stage. Evaluation also needs to involve those who had any participation in the selection or communication of the crisis response, along with any pertinent data that is being used to evaluate performance (e.g., ticket sales figures pre/post crisis, news articles).

Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold (2006) suggest that some of the following questions can help sports organizations evaluate their performance:

- Was the plan activated in a timely and efficient manner?
- Were all important publics identified and served effectively?
- Was the organization able to position itself as the best source of information regarding the crisis?
- How well did the plan perform in protecting the reputation of the organization?
- How can the plan be improved before the next crisis the organization may face? (p. 182).

While these represent just a sampling of questions that can be asked, it is important that the evaluation process is comprehensive and that the crisis communication plan is revised accordingly based upon the evaluative process.

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