

PAST TRUTHS ARE STILL TRUE

With today's interconnected world I recently revisited a case study written by eminent author, Professor Robert R Ulmar, Chair of the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, "Effective Crisis Management through Established Stakeholder Relationships" ([Management Communication Quarterly, Vol. 14, No 4, May 2001](#)) and found his findings even more relevant for dealing with today's extensively used communication platforms.

Professor Ulmar demonstrated the importance of pre-crisis communication with stakeholders and that communication's effects on post-crisis recovery – or **"you reap what you sow"**.

Without meaningful and mutually beneficial engagement, an organisation is likely to:

"Emphasise their own concerns over those of stakeholders. Their communication is largely focused on legal concerns and typically results in denial of responsibility and lack of useful information to stakeholders. These types of responses have been widely criticised."

Ulmar's research was largely formulated prior to the revolutionary uptake in smart phones and at the infancy of now ubiquitous social media platforms, yet his findings are even more relevant in this new communications age.

"The present study illustrates the importance of developing rich, positive communication relationships with stakeholders on an ongoing basis as a form of crisis preparation."



Prior to these technologies it was the media that communicated and commented on how a crisis evolved and its outcomes. Now it is connected and informed stakeholders informing and commenting, with the media often following in their wake.

Consequently, if an organisation has not engaged and communicated with its stakeholders - as simple as bulletins and briefings for local communities and special interest groups, or even regular media reports on developments - it is those very stakeholders that are likely to be the ones posting negative comments.

Ulmar quotes Robert L Heath (Professor of Communication at the University of Houston):

“. . . crisis management requires managers to implement ‘standards of corporate responsibility needed to meet key publics’ expectations’ before the crisis.”

The clear message here is to proactively engage stakeholders in a planned and concerted way incorporating mutually beneficial values pre-crisis. In this way you are more likely to gain greater trust and understanding during a crisis, and provided the crisis is deemed accidental rather than ‘sloppy management’ or worse, ‘negligent management’, then post-crisis recovery will come at considerably less cost.

The values need to be genuine and of benefit to both parties. And those values must be reflected in your communications during a crisis. If they are not, you risk facing additional condemnation.

Stakeholder theory is the theoretical grounding for much of Ulmar’s paper, and in the time of connected and savvy stakeholders with high expectations, it is even more relevant today.

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