

IS YOUR CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN POISED FOR FAILURE?

By Merilee Kern, MBA



Crisis management has been front and center amid the COVID-19 pandemic, spurring fresh conversations on how businesses can better weather the storms foreseen and unforeseen. What's become clear is that industries across the board collectively need to better plan for, preempt and react to disruptions and perilous challenges — optimally doing so in a way that helps the operation emerge stronger and more agile on the other side.

Much of the current and certainly well-intended dialogue around crisis management strategy largely reflects mindsets and methodologies that fall short in today's complex macro-economic climate or are now entirely antiquated given current conditions. Novel challenges like the coronavirus demand commensurately fresh ideation that intend to help organizations large and small survive and succeed in today's brand of chaos.

With this in mind, I turned to Kiya Dowdy Frazier and Oscar Frazier, principles at nDemand Consulting, a global crisis management firm that designs and implements leading techniques helping federal government agencies, heads of state, corporations and entrepreneurial small businesses maneuver through and beyond menacing circumstances. Affectionately known as “the Mr. and Mrs. Smith of crisis management,” below team Frazier (“TF”) offers a few modern crisis management techniques that, while somewhat counterintuitive, are duly compelling and convincingly sensible.

Much is said about gaining or reestablishing trust when a crisis presents. But is that enough?

TF: In short, no, it's not enough, at least in the old sense of the idea. Gaining marketplace trust, building relationships and even securing leads require radically different approaches in today's world. People have grown weary of misinformation and contradictory statements from those in positions of authority and are perhaps more jaded and doubtful now than ever before. When there is a lack of understanding or credibility concerns, fear and defensiveness take over as the default operating system, and individuals put their guard up.

The first step now begins with “me too.” Many are facing the exact same challenges, whether related to COVID-19 impacts or otherwise. So be empathetic, approachable and forthcoming about your own challenges and experiences. That level of vulnerability — demonstrating that you are just as concerned and effected as the person you're meeting — is a highly effective way to build trust.

How significant is data management amid a disruption?

TF: Collecting and analyzing data to drive decision making internally within the organization is just no longer enough. Today, transparency about what that data “means” is paramount and represents both a gift and curse of data. While everyone is apt to share good news, even a simple, unintentional oversight or dulling of data can have costly implications. In today's highly competitive marketplace, there are fewer chances to get it right and even make up for what we've done.

Indeed, the ability to leverage those analytics for both short-and long-term modernization is key to survival. But in this new environment, we have to find ways to do more with less. Data, good or bad, is a lifeline here, and processing of informational inputs for highly-intentional and strategic decision making is the order of the day. Naturally, the first step is to clearly communicating key findings. But companies often miss the second and third piece: helping the audience, whether internal or external, make sense of everything, as well as following

up with a clear plan of action to mitigate risk, resolve current issues and position themselves for a stronger future. It is one thing to provide data; it is very different to provide data with actionable tactics.

Companies must also make a concerted effort to control messages across all platforms, including social media, where information (and misinformation) spreads quickly. The right words conveyed with the right tone and with the proper imagery is what's required.

What else should business be mindful of in a crisis situation?

TF: The very thought of the word “crisis” tends to spur a sense of panic. Even so, it's wise to take emergency situations head-on and with a laser focus. Any crisis management plan that tries to take on too much or that otherwise veers away from the actual and core crisis at hand is one that's likely to fall short at best or, worse, fail altogether.

When people panic, they tend to inflate or deflate factual data to fit their own needs, desires, agenda or gut instincts. This is the single biggest mistake a company in crisis can make, since processing data objectively is key. Situation analysis requires taking a cold, hard look at realities and making even the most difficult — if not painful — of decisions to get back on a recuperative course.

Today's class of business challenges clearly require a recalibrated approach to crisis management and communications. Even tried-and-true tactics of yore may deliver diminishing returns as industry and markets evolve in tandem with public health, political and socioeconomic events. Even undertaking the three tactical strategies above can foster the kind of progressive paradigm shift required to help companies best weather those inevitable and seemingly omnipresent storms.

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