

How Mosaic-Esterhazy applied a crisis communication strategy when it suddenly had the world's attention

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Abstract

Success in navigating through a crisis situation requires good planning, sound judgment, and swift reaction. Some organizations, however, do not plan and are still able to successfully communicate in times of uncertainty. On January 29, 2006, 72 miners were trapped in a potash mine operated by Mosaic more than 1 km below the surface in Esterhazy (Canada). Within hours, media from around the globe was in Esterhazy to cover the story. Mosaic-Esterhazy did not have a designated external communication spokesperson or a comprehensive crisis communication plan to deal with such a predicament. Nonetheless, actions taken during and after the crisis were considered by many to be nearly faultless, and the Mosaic-Esterhazy incident is now recognized as a model in mine safety around the world. This paper's intent is to understand why Mosaic-Esterhazy was successful in assembling an effective crisis communication strategy.

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1. Introduction

Lagadec (1991) states that crisis management is not just about management; it is also about knowledge management and appropriate information dispersion during extraordinary events. Technical expertise and managerial procedures provide organizations with strategic tools for proper prevention and communication strategies during a crisis. In any crisis situation, especially in events occurring in mines, planning is of little use if there is confusion about communication roles. Crisis communication confers meaning to actions taken in an uncertain environment.

Canada has seen its fair share of mine disasters: Hillcrest in 1914, Springhill in 1958, and Westray in 1992 are a few examples. In Nova Scotia, B.C., Alberta, and other provinces, many miners were killed while working in mines. In each of these incidents, crisis communication was critical. Individuals involved with these organizations admit that accidents, fires, and structure failures are expected. Most mining disasters in history have been human induced. These are often referred to as socio-technical disasters. Others were caused by natural disasters (i.e. earthquakes). Any form of underground mining is inherently dangerous, with the potential for roof falls, cave-ins, and other accidents. Since 1862, the world has witnessed over 36 major mining disasters where at least one miner was reported killed. Canada's worst mining disaster was reported at the Hillcrest mine in Alberta in 1914 where 189 miners were killed. More recently,

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the Westray mine disaster in Nova Scotia that occurred in 1992 was still vivid in people's minds when the Esterhazy incident occurred.

Esterhazy, a small town of about 2500 people in the province of Saskatchewan which takes pride in being the potash capital of the world, attracted global attention on January 29, 2006, when 72 miners were trapped in a potash mine more than 1 km below the surface. At the time, Mosaic's executives in Esterhazy did not have an external communication spokesperson or a comprehensive crisis communication strategy to deal with such an occurrence. Nonetheless, actions taken during and after the crisis were considered by many to be nearly faultless. All 72 miners were saved and no casualties were reported. Mosaic's mine in Esterhazy is now recognized as a model in mine safety around the world.

Our intent is to understand why Mosaic-Esterhazy was successful in assembling an effective crisis communication strategy. In this paper, we present a literature review on crisis communication as well as an outline of the key events that occurred during the mining incident that struck the Mosaic potash mine in the Esterhazy mining facility. The scope of the present research exclusively analyzes what occurred before and during the incident. It purposely excludes data following the event to eliminate evidence that would lead to speculative inferences. Secondary data published after the incident were considered only to measure the success of the communication strategy employed by Mosaic-Esterhazy.

2. Research setting and method

Our aim was to conduct a systematic study of the incident. To do so, various reports on the crisis were evaluated, press articles were collected and analyzed, and stakeholders involved with the crisis were interviewed. Finally, evidence suggesting that Mosaic-Esterhazy was successful with its crisis communication strategy is presented, and a discussion as to why Mosaic-Esterhazy was able to successfully bring together an efficient crisis communication strategy is conducted.

Since the intention of this article is to identify and depict key managerial principles for crisis communication strategies, this article should contribute to a more thorough understanding of such strategies. Given this explorative focus, it was decided to make an explorative case study, in accordance with Yin (1994). Holistic data referring to the single case of Mosaic in Esterhazy were collected. For this case study, it was possible to provide a theoretical perspective by distinguishing between different concepts of crisis management and crisis communication and correlating them with Mosaic-Esterhazy's mining incident. Moreover, the present case study uses multiple sources of evidence, such as documentation, archival data, recorded spoken notes, and in-depth personal interviews. Principle investigators of this study visited the mine to fully appreciate the crisis environment in which miners were in during the incident. Key informants from Mosaic-Esterhazy's executive committee answered open-ended questions, validated published quotes in the media, and were asked to review a draft of the case study prior to its completion.

3. Crisis communication: a model

Crisis communication is often compared to a kaleidoscope: any single action alters its entire structure. New situations call for a fresh look at our crisis paradigms. Therefore a strategy must be in place before the inevitable complexities can be dealt with (Morier & Egan, 2006). Many organizations in recent history have made crucial mistakes in crisis communication. In 2006, a West Virginia U.S. coal mine was the location of a crucial crisis communication error. Twelve miners were declared dead just 2 h after mine officials stated to families and friends that everyone would get out of the mine safely (Langfitt, 2006).

Research in crisis outlines three distinctive premises that would allow an incident to be called a crisis. First, the internal system of an organization or an industry must be affected by the event (Roux-Dufort, 2000). Second, the fundamental principles of implicated subjects are questioned, altered, or even protected by newly created tacit defense mechanisms (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1995). Lastly, no active mechanisms within an organization or industry can be employed to regain its former condition, processes, or structure. There are ruptures between traditional communication practices and anchored paradigms (Lagadec, 1991).

In crisis communication, organizations are usually represented by key informants. Leaders must have ongoing, two-way access to information (e.g., research, media stories, and data) in order to assess the situation and make informed decisions. Without information, crisis communication may be ineffective. Aggregate information and its flow through interorganizational relationships need to be reliable to allow factual risk management. Factual risk management is

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