

TEACHING BRIEF

Crisis and The Queen

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ABSTRACT

The in-class activity explores how Princess Diana's death turned into a crisis for the British monarchy. The movie, which is interspersed with actual footage, explores how the monarchy responded following the death of Princess Diana. After watching the film *The Queen* the class discusses aspects of the crisis, response strategies, and how it may have been handled differently today due to social media.

Keywords: film, social media, crisis communication

Examining a real-world crisis through the lens of a film can help students better understand how to respond to real-life public relations crisis. This activity allows student to explore whether what took place was a crisis or paracrisis, the mistakes made, the response strategies used, and what they would have done if they were in the position of the Prime Minister or the Queen. Although some students may not have been aware of Princess Diana's life or death, they find the accident and what followed to be an interesting look into how a real-life crisis was handled.

The movie, which is set shortly after Diana's death, is a study in crisis communication and how to, and not to, address a crisis. Zaremba (2010) noted the film "illustrates how the newly elected Prime Minister, Tony Blair, attempted to defuse a developing crisis for the monarchy in Great Britain" (p. 113). Additionally, the inclusion of actual footage of mourners and the flowers outside Buckingham Palace can help to bridge the gap between what actually happened and Hollywood's version of events.

Shift in Response Time

While still time sensitive, prior to social media an organization had the benefit of a bit more time to craft a response to a crisis. Birch (1994) wrote, "The one thing that is in short supply during crisis is time" (p. 33). Additionally, Fishman (1999) stated, "The level and extent of media coverage directly influences the degree of 'urgency' placed upon an organization to provide a coherent explanation or to undertake corrective action" (p. 348). Tony Blair, prime minister of the United Kingdom at the time of Diana's death, gave a speech the morning she died where he historically called Diana "the people's princess." Queen Elizabeth did not make a public statement until five days after her death which caused some controversy among the people of the United Kingdom and a decline in her popularity (Kirby, 1998).

In today's 24/7/365 world, organizations are expected to respond

within the hour of a crisis, if not before. Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) discuss the term “golden hour” which is “the first hour after the scandal breaks” (p. 239). This “golden hour” is important as the organization can get its side of the story out before the media. The faster an organization, or in this case a monarchy, can respond to a crisis, the better for its image and reputation (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016).

A crisis response must address the issue with as much transparency as possible, providing information to the key publics about what took place and how the organization will address it (Millar & Heath, 2004). Further, “strategic actions in response to a crisis can enhance an organization’s legitimacy” (Veil et al., 2012, p. 333). Rather than waiting for the Queen to respond, Tony Blair, the Prime Minister at the time of Diana’s accident, took action through his press conference and decision to speak to the media. Eventually, through pressure, Queen Elizabeth did provide a response to her public via a televised statement.

Connection to Practice

Incorporating an actual crisis example through a film provides students an opportunity to apply what they have learned about crises and how to address them. The film is shown at the end of the semester so that students can point out and discuss the topics discussed throughout the semester from lecture, readings, guest speakers, and other in-class discussions.

The 2020 Global Communications Report (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2020) noted COVID-19 “taught us, future-focused PR executives must be prepared to manage unexpected events and controversial issues” (p. 12). As many crises a public relations practitioner may encounter in their career are unexpected, including Princess Diana’s death, this activity allows students to understand how to be better prepared to confront these issues should they arise.

One of the benefits of this exercise is first, the students are exposed

to a piece of history (although it is a film which assumes some parts of what happened behind the scenes), and are able to identify the crisis aspects. Second, the exercise allows students to explore the various crisis response strategies used (which have been discussed in class prior to watching the film) and if, in their opinion, they did or did not work. Third, it provides an opportunity for students to explore what they would have done differently in the situation, as well as how modern technology, such as social media, may have changed the course of the discussion and the crisis response strategies employed by all parties involved.

Assignment and Implementation

Toward the end of the semester, students in an upper division public relations and crisis communication course would watch the film *The Queen*. By showing it at the end of the semester, which takes two class periods to watch, students can apply what they understand regarding what constitutes a crisis and the various crisis response strategies. Further, students witness a “crisis in action” without the stress of having to handle it themselves.

If teaching a crisis communication class, before watching the film, the professor should cover the following topics over the course of the semester:

- Definition of crisis
- Difference between a crisis and paracrisis
- Identifying the trigger event to a crisis
- Responding to the crisis
- Identifying the appropriate crisis response strategy(ies) to apply in a situation
- Identifying an organization’s audience(s)
- Identifying and selecting a crisis management team and spokespeople
- Ethical communication prior to, during, and following a crisis

- Monitoring throughout the crisis
- Evaluating the situation post-crisis

Having discussed and read this information throughout the semester, students should be able to discuss how they believe the crisis addressed in the film was handled and what they would have done differently. Through written responses discussing the following questions, students can work out the best response strategy in their opinion and determine how they would go about implementing it if this were to have happened today. They are also able to demonstrate how, if at all, they understand the concepts which have been discussed throughout the semester in this application exercise. Students would need a minimum of one day to work on this assignment before submitting it to the professor for grading. It should be submitted prior to the next class meeting day following the viewing of the film to facilitate the debrief in-class discussion. The professor can then elaborate on the responses provided, which enables a more in-depth class discussion around the crisis itself and recommendations they have for crisis messaging during and after the event.

As students are watching the film, encourage them to take notes on the crisis elements they witness throughout. Once the film ends, on the second day, provide students the following discussion questions and ask them to submit their responses to them thoroughly, demonstrating their comprehension and understanding of crises and the content of the film:

- Is this a crisis or a paracrisis? How did you determine this?
- What was the trigger event for the crisis?
- Could the crisis have been prevented?
- What should have been done to prepare for this type of crisis (the death of a royal/non-royal)?
- What crisis response strategies did you notice?
- What did Blair and his team do well? Need to improve on?

- If you were in Blair's role, what would you have done differently/the same?
- If you were the Queen, would you have waited so long to respond? Why/why not?
- Do you think the people of the UK believed Queen Elizabeth and her statement? Why/why not?
- Diana died in 1997 when social media did not exist; if this were to happen today how do you think this would have changed the management of the crisis and the response to it?
- How would you have responded to this event if you worked on the public relations team for the Prime Minister? For Queen Elizabeth? Explain your response.

Assessment

The key learning objectives for the written assignment are to: 1) Identify the trigger event for this crisis; 2) Identify the crisis response strategies implemented in the film; 3) Discuss what the various parties did well and needed improvement regarding the crisis response; 4) Discuss how social media may have changed the crisis response by the various parties involved.

The written assignment is evaluated by the student's ability to accomplish the following: 1) to demonstrate knowledge of the types of crisis response strategies; 2) to identify the crisis response strategies used; 3) to effectively discuss the crisis response strategies and what they would have done in the situation; and 4) to edit and proofread their response prior to submission. This assignment counts as 5% of the total grade in the course.

Conclusion

The author has observed that students seem to enjoy learning through watching and discussing this particular film. The author has also found this activity has helped students better identify the various crisis

response strategies which have been discussed throughout the semester. Additionally, the students have been able to apply their public relations knowledge to this situation pulling not only from the crisis course, but from courses including social media, writing, and others. One challenge has been some students not effectively or completely answering the questions posed. One way to address this has been after grading the written assignment the professor uses the next class meeting to hold a debriefing to discuss the questions with the class. The debriefing also allows the professor to further discuss the crisis strategies and responses and lets students hear the perspectives of their classmates and continue the discussion. Finally, this debriefing permits those students who did not provide complete or effective answers to discuss their thoughts verbally.

Following the debriefing with the class, students remarked how they enjoyed the use of outside media to talk about and make clearer the topics which had been discussed in class. Others stated the group discussion allowed them to see other classmate's point of view and build off each other when determining the course of action during and following a crisis. One student stated it was their favorite assignment as they were able to learn how to deal with a crisis on such a large scale, and how an institution like the British monarchy could recover from such a crisis.

As technology continues to change and evolve, other questions could be added to the list of discussion questions provided such as questions related to international public relations. A variation of the assignment could be having students discuss the questions in groups in class to develop a response, then with the class as a whole. These discussions could count toward in-class participation points for those who participated in the conversation.

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