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Handbook of Research on Effective Communication, Leadership, and Conflict Resolution

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Chapter 8

Surviving the Conflict of Self-Inflicted Organizational Crises

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms provide channels for both individuals and organizations to engage with global audiences. A successful social media message can reach millions, and shape the way publics view a particular person, group, or cause. As organizations become more engaged with publics through social media platforms, a new area of organizational risk has also developed. It is possible for an organization to create a self-inflicted crisis through the unintentional transmission of a poorly worded or ill-conceived social media message. This type of self-induced crisis event creates organizational conflict that must be managed quickly. This chapter explores three cases of organizational conflict resulting from self-inflicted crisis events. All three events caused major conversations to erupt on social media platforms. The author examines the social media-based communication practices of three organizations and draws lessons from both successes and failures for how organizations should respond to self-inflicted crises.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media platforms have provided channels for both individuals and organizations to engage with vast global audiences. It is not an overstatement to say that a successful social media message can reach millions and shape the way publics view a particular person, group, or cause. For example, the “ALS Ice Bucket Challenge” went viral in the summer of 2014 and raised more than \$115 million by November of the same year (Worland, 2014). The challenge consisted of a bucket of ice water being dumped over a person’s head, and then challenging other people to do the same within 24 hours. If the

challenged individual did not comply, they were expected to donate money to a charity (Worland, 2014). The specific charity that made the challenge go viral was for research into amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease (ALS Association, 2015). The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge began to gain major traction when former Boston College baseball player Pete Frates, diagnosed with ALS in 2012, decided to challenge some friends via Facebook (Keyes, 2014). Frates was not the first to use the challenge with the hashtag “#StrikeOutALS,” but he appears to be the person whose social network launched the challenge beyond a local fad to an international phenomenon.

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Another dimension of the power of social media messages is the case of Justine Sacco, former senior communication director for media company IAC, whose thoughtless and insensitive tweet went viral and caused international outrage. Shortly before boarding a flight from London to South Africa, Sacco tweeted, “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!” Sacco was not concerned about the influence of her tweet – with only 170 followers on Twitter she tended to use her account as a personal space for venting frustration; she likely did not think anyone would read the tweet (Ronson, 2015). Instead, the tweet was noticed, was passed along via Twitter, and eventually became the “No. 1 worldwide trend on Twitter” (Ronson, 2015, para. 5). Before Justine Sacco landed in South Africa she had already lost her job, become the subject of international disdain and ridicule, and sparked a global conversation about race, class, and the influence of social media.

As organizations become more engaged with publics through social media platforms, a new area of organizational risk has also developed. One of the greatest strengths of social media messaging is also one of its greatest weaknesses. It is possible for an organization to create a self-inflicted crisis through the unintentional transmission of a poorly worded or ill-conceived social media message (Bhasin, 2012). This type of self-induced crisis event creates organizational conflict that must be managed quickly.

This chapter consists of three parts. The author begins by reviewing relevant literature. Next, the author conducts a comparative case study of three distinct self-inflicted crisis events: the Starbucks “Race Together” campaign (Hensley & Blau, 2015); the ineffective response from Urban Outfitters following the production of offensive products (The Week, 2015); and the mistaken tweet sent by the DiGiorno account which misused the “#WhyIStayed” hashtag (Griner, 2014). Finally, the chapter concludes with lessons learned from

the case studies, as well as a set of principles to inform organizations managing this type of organizational conflict.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Networking Sites

Social Network Sites (SNSs) as they are currently conceived have existed in some form since 1997 (boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNSs, such as Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter, are:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211).

These sites exist to serve a variety of functions, from maintaining connections with existing friendship networks, to finding other individuals who share a particular interest (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In addition to these functions, SNSs exist as a space for engaging in dialogic communication.

Micro-Blogs

Within the context of social media and SNSs exists a subset of platforms called “micro-blogs” (Edwards, Edwards, Spence, & Shelton, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). These types of sites, such as Twitter or Tumblr, “allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 106). Zhao and Rosson (2009) found that people tend to use micro-blogs to share information they might not otherwise share on existing channels, such as a real-time update on their actions, or for pervasive access to information in a format that requires brevity.

Consider the micro-blogging site Twitter, which is currently the largest micro-blogging site on the Internet, with over 302 million active monthly users (Twitter, 2015). Since its inception in 2006, Twitter has become a massive, international, web-based system for interpersonal and organizational interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). A large piece of Twitter's designed purpose is to be a dialogic tool for businesses to engage with stakeholders in new, dynamic ways. However, recent research into organizational use of SNSs indicates that organizations are not using these sites dialogically (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Park & Reber, 2008). For example, Linvill, McGee, and Hicks (2012) found that "colleges and universities primarily employed Twitter as an institutional news feed to a general population" (p. 637), rather than as a tool for two-way communication.

The tendency to use Twitter as a broadcasting tool rather than for meaningful interaction is evident in other organizational contexts as well. While studying non-profit organizations' use of Twitter, Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton (2012), and Waters and Jamal (2011) found that non-profit organizations tend to rely on one-way, asymmetrical communication practices for engaging with stakeholders. Similarly, Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) found that *Fortune 500* companies also underutilize the dialogic capabilities of Twitter and similar social resources. Organizations are sending out links to articles, updates about upcoming events, and informing customers about sales. However, they are generally not effectively engaging in two-way communication. This is not only a missed opportunity for connecting with organizational stakeholders, but also a failure to employ a tool that could greatly assist in managing organizational conflict.

Organizational Conflict

Conflict is part of all relationships. Organizations are, by most definitions, networks of interconnected relationships. As Tjosvold (2008) asserts,

"to work in an organization is to be in conflict" (p. 19). Roloff (1987) defines organizational conflict as "activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network, members of other collectivities, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of the organization" (p. 496). Rahim (2002) adds that conflict is "an interactive process" (p. 207). Accepting that conflict is a regular and accepted part of life in an organization, there are perhaps two ways that organizational members can approach and respond to conflict as it arises. On the one hand, people can view conflict as a debilitating, overwhelming, or detrimental event, or series of events. Taking this view can lead to the deterioration of the organization (Aula & Siira, 2010). More specifically, a negative view of conflict can result in accidents, absenteeism, and a general decrease in overall health and well-being (De Dreu, C.K.W., van Dierendonck, D., & Dijkstra, M.T.M., 2004; Meyer, 2004).

From the other perspective, one can view conflict as an opportunity for growth or renewal. Rather than thinking of the negative, organizational members can move toward a conflict-positive perspective (Tjosvold, 2008). From this perspective individuals can see conflict as an opportunity for improvement and positive change in the organization, seeking to grow from conflicting perspectives and ideas. With this concept of conflict, organizational members should pursue three key goals for effective conflict management: pursue organizational learning, meet the needs of organizational stakeholders, and communicate ethically throughout the process (Mitroff, 1998; Rahim, 2002; Tompkins, 1995). By seeking to learn from the events that led up to the conflict, the conflict itself, and how it was resolved (whether successfully or not), organizational members can help the organization function more effectively and avoid similar conflict in the future. By meeting the needs of stakeholders, organizations can help those in conflict to feel heard and appreciated, and can also foster an environment where stake-

holders shape the organization by assessing and potentially revising outdated policies and unclear organizational goals. Lastly, while pursuing ethical communication practices, both organizational members and organizational leaders are more likely to make decisions and perform actions that will benefit the organization and the larger community. This also benefits stakeholders, and helps those in conflict trust the organization and its leaders.

While conflict in organizations is a regular occurrence, there are times when it can escalate to the level of crisis. In the current social media context, social-mediated communication has created a context where conflict can become a crisis in moments.

Organizational Crisis

An organizational crisis is defined “as a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high priority goals” (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015, p. 7). This definition is good for the cases evaluated in this chapter, with one small caveat. The crises that develop as a result of social media errors or misstatements are generally self-inflicted crisis events. These crises, therefore, should be preventable events. Although they should be preventable, it does not alter how organizations should respond to and manage these crises.

While many organizational leaders, and most legal teams, will immediately want to save face and engage in reputation management following a crisis, this may not be the best option for the organization. Much of the extant literature on crisis communication indicates that engaging in open, honest communication and developing strong stakeholder relationships is a healthier option that will lead to renewal and to stronger organizational relationships in the future (Botan, 1993, 1997; Olaniran, Scholl, Williams, & Boyer,

2012; Olaniran & Williams, 2001; Ulmer, et al., 2015, 2009, 2007). A theoretical perspective that captures this concept is the discourse of renewal (Ulmer et al., 2015).

The discourse of renewal theory argues for organizations (members and leaders) to pursue four key communication goals before, during, and after crisis. First, organizational learning is vital. Organizations should learn from past successes and failures and from those of other organizations (Ulmer et al., 2015). Second is effective organizational rhetoric. Organizational leaders should communicate early and often during a crisis, and should work to help organizational members and other key stakeholders look toward a “new normal,” rather than trying to get “back to normal” (Ulmer et al., 2015). The third communication goal is ethical communication. Organizational members and leaders should strive to communicate ethically in crisis situations. This is perhaps best represented by Nilsen’s (1974) concept of significant choice. Nilsen argues that stakeholders must be provided with the information they need so that they can be equipped to make choices based on all available, relevant information, rather than on partial or cherry-picked information. Ulmer et al. (2015) apply the concept of significant choice to crisis response situations. The final goal is for organizational members to maintain a prospective vision, looking forward for ways to achieve renewal after the crisis, rather than dwelling on the past and fixating on what might have been done differently (Ulmer et al., 2015).

The tenets of the discourse of renewal align well with the recommendations found in the literature on organizational conflict management. Both bodies of literature argue for the value of open, honest, ethical communication. There is also a call for key stakeholders to be involved in the process of managing the event. Importantly, both call for a focus on renewal, growth, and vision for the future, rather than dwelling on who is to blame and what might have been done differently leading up to the conflict or crisis. While it is useful to learn

from past mistakes, it is detrimental to allow those mistakes to be the sole focus, preventing growth and forward movement. There are several recent cases that support these perspectives.

Self-Inflicted Crisis Events

A quick review of headlines over the past few years would show a consistent trend of organizations sparking conflicts on social media. Sometimes, the conflicts are caused by small mistakes and are easily managed. For example, an American Red Cross employee inadvertently tweeted from the official Red Cross account instead of his own private account: “Ryan found two more 4 bottle packs of Dogfish Head’s Midas Touch beer... when we drink we do it right #gettingslizzerd” (Bhasin, 2012). In this case, the Red Cross responded well: “We’ve deleted the rogue tweet but rest assured the Red Cross is sober and we’ve confiscated the keys” (Bhasin, 2012). The brewing company, Dogfish Head, immediately jumped in on the conversation by encouraging Twitter followers to use the “#gettingslizzerd” hashtag as a rallying point for donating to disaster relief (Bhasin, 2012).

This quick response minimized the public backlash by acknowledging the error, while also appropriately maintaining levity with what could have been a very sensitive matter. The Red Cross acknowledged the tweet was unprofessional, and ensured the public that they were addressing the situation. In other situations, this type of unintentional conflict turns into a self-induced crisis event for the organization involved. This chapter presents and analyzes three such self-inflicted crisis events.

CASE DESCRIPTIONS AND ANALYSES

This chapter is built around a comparative case study of three specific self-induced organizational

crises that required some level of conflict management. A comparative case study is useful as a tool for analyzing individual, organizational, social, and group dynamics (Flick, 2004; Yin, 2014). The following three cases were chosen because they are recent exemplars of organizations that either effectively or ineffectively managed conflict after a self-induced crisis. The cases were selected as part of a purposeful maximal sample, as they demonstrate different perspectives on the problem the author wishes to study and address (Creswell, 2013). Data for the cases were gathered from organizational websites, reports from news media, and from Twitter through the use of Salesforce Radian6 social media listening software. Each section begins with a summary paragraph of the overall case, followed by the full case description and analysis.

Starbucks

The first case is an example of a campaign that seemed to be a good idea, but was unfortunately poorly executed. In March of 2015, Starbucks attempted to launch a campaign designed to encourage conversations about race in the U.S. The company announced the campaign following a series of successful town hall meetings with employees and community members across the U.S. (Starbucks, 2015). Following the series of well-received, well-publicized town hall meetings, Starbucks attempted to launch their “#RaceTogether” campaign by having baristas talk to customers about race relations in the United States. The backlash they faced on social media was damaging to the organization as a whole (Hensley & Blau, 2015). After one week, the company had baristas stop writing “Race Together” on cups and allowed the program to quickly die out (Sanders, 2015). The conversation on social media around the campaign was fairly limited, so the case study will examine how the company might have engaged more effectively with stakeholders on social media platforms.

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When Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz announced the launch of a series of programs for employees and local communities in 2014 they were generally well received. For example, the Starbucks College Achievement Plan is a program where Starbucks partnered with Arizona State University to provide free tuition to their baristas (Molinet, 2015; Starbucks, 2014). The other two programs launched in 2014 were called “SolutionsCity” and the Retail Excellence Training Program. Solutions City is designed to engage local leaders across the United States about civic challenges “on three key issues: providing access to education, supporting veterans, and empowering youth” (Starbucks, 2014, para. 12). The Retail Excellence Training Program was targeted at offering young people in areas associated with low access to education a chance to gain professional experience and training (Starbucks, 2014). Starbucks continued to gain ground when, in December of 2014, CEO Howard Schultz hosted an impromptu meeting about race relations in the United States at the Seattle headquarters (Starbucks, 2014). This meeting turned into a series of talks with partners and employees over the course of several weeks.

Entering 2015, Starbucks continued to tap into programs that were building social capital and improving the public image of a company already known for service to local communities (Mirabella, 2014; QSR, 2014). The company also continued to push forward with efforts to spur on conversations about race in the United States. In March of 2015 Mellody Hobson, Starbucks board member and president of Ariel Investments, spoke to the annual meeting of Starbucks shareholders about being “color brave” (Hobson, 2015). She challenged those in attendance to set aside the misconception that being “color blind” means they are solving problems related to race. She argued, “color blindness means we are ignoring the problem” (Hobson, 2015, para. 14). Schultz then took this idea and ran with it, announcing to the shareholders at the annual meeting in 2015 that Starbucks would be continuing the mission

of advancing racial equality in the United States by launching a campaign to start a conversation. Schultz called for employees to begin conversations in individual stores by engaging with customers and writing “Race Together” on customers’ cups. This was paired with an 8-page spread in USA Today on March 20, 2015, with content designed to highlight injustice and challenges related to racism in the United States today (Starbucks, 2015). With this announcement, Schultz launched Starbucks into a weeklong social media crisis that may have yielded more criticism than conversation.

Soon after the campaign was announced, Starbucks started to receive feedback on social media. Over the course of two weeks there were more than 22,000 tweets about the campaign (Twitter data were collected via Radian6 software). The tone of the tweets had a broad spectrum. Some were simply snarky: “‘Iced tea please.’ (customer pays, barista slowly makes change). (customer waits anxiously hoping to get change before barista mentions race)” (@bendreyfuss, 2015, March 15), “yesterday: talk about Love at McDonalds. today: talk about race at starbucks. tmrw: psychoanalysis from guy who makes blizzards at dairy queen” (@MikeIsaac, 2015, March 16). Others attacked the campaign: “Despite our difference all of us -- left or right, black or white -- can agree that this Starbucks race talk idea is really stupid” (@HeerJeet, 2015, March 17); “The only thing worse than Starbucks is discussing sensitive cultural topics with strangers at Starbucks” (@joshpetri, 2015, March 16). Some ignored the campaign and instead bashed Starbucks’ leadership: “The only folks happy about Starbucks baristas discussing race with customers are the suits who run it. Feel-good liberalism at its worst” (@JamilSmith, 2015, March 16). Some of the conversation around the campaign acknowledged that the idea behind Race Together was probably well-intentioned, but was perhaps not the best way to encourage a legitimate discussion: “I get what Starbucks is trying to do, but nah. I’m just in there trying to get a caramel macchiato” (@kokofasho, 2015, March 17). With

rare exception, the Twitter conversation around the Race Together campaign was negative and cynical.

While Twitter users were exploring inventive ways to insult Starbucks' campaign, the campaign looked very different to people who were viewing it on a day-to-day basis in specific Starbucks stores. Over the course of a few days, NPR's Kelly McEvers and Karen Grigsby Bates visited eleven different Starbucks locations (McEvers, 2015). Bates found no one among the baristas looking to talk about race, and she had nothing written on or added to her cup to indicate there was any kind of campaign going on. McEvers, on the other hand, found one location (out of the five she visited) where baristas were talking about race.

As the conversation around the campaign grew online and in stores, Starbucks' leadership seemed absent from the conversation. From the time the campaign was launched through a week after it ended there were a total of ten tweets from Starbucks that had anything to do with the Race Together campaign. All of those tweets were either links to articles that Starbucks had written for their own public relations web portal, or were retweets from people congratulating them for launching the campaign. There was more interaction between Twitter users and Corey duBrowa, the Senior Vice President of Global Communications for Starbucks. However, by March 17 the conversation turned from supportive tweets or general disapproval to specific, pointed questions for duBrowa about the campaign and what Starbucks would be doing for its employees, especially people of color. Some of the tweets were clearly intended to attack or "troll" duBrowa: "So was this your idea? Because it's really bad. @coreydu @CNN" (@GRIMALKINRN, 2015, March 17). Others offered serious questions. For example, one user asked the following and was promptly blocked by duBrowa: "@coreydu Are you going to educate your workers on race relations and racism in America? Will you compensate them for this?" (@BartoszScheller, 2015, March 17). Before long,

duBrowa was blocking users who were critical of him or the campaign.

By the evening of Wednesday, March 18, duBrowa had deactivated his Twitter account. The response to his account deactivation is fairly predictable: "Laughing hysterically at the fact @coreydu deleted his account after PoC [Persons of Color] engaged him on race. Starbucks going to close its doors too?" (@jskylerinc, 2015, March 17); "not sure it's not a good look for @coreydu to be blocking all these black women the same day starbucks rolls this #racetogether thing out" (@local_maxima, 2015, March 17); "@Starbucks your PR Rep @coreydu quit Twitter over #Race-Together. Might wanna shut that [expletive] down before it becomes an even BIGGER disaster" (@Jskylerinc, 2015, March 17). On Thursday, March 19, duBrowa reopened his account and posted a blog addressing his absence while sharing that he "felt personally attacked..." and "overwhelmed" (Geier, 2015).

On March 22, 2015, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz published an "open letter" to partners (Starbucks employees are called partners) about the Race Together initiative. He indicated that the initiative to have baristas talk about race with customers had ended, and that they would continue as an organization to pursue conversations about race in other ways and other venues. Over the week that the initiative was ongoing, Starbucks largely ignored the conversation that was happening on Twitter. While it is true that there were individuals whose interests seemed to end at attacking or belittling Starbucks, there were many who offered real concerns and sincere critiques. While Starbucks did not see lasting harm to their credibility or to their business, it is perhaps a testament to the multiple initiatives they already have in process designed to support local communities, national groups, and their own employees, rather than a reflection on how successful their campaign was. This was a missed opportunity for Starbucks, whose leadership seems

to have remained silent on social media during what could have been a chance for growth and to accomplish organizational goals.

Urban Outfitters

An exemplar of unsuccessful organizational conflict management is the recurring poor decision making of Urban Outfitters. In May of 2011, Urban Outfitters was accused of stealing art from independent artists to use in their product designs (Bhasin, 2012). Urban Outfitters responded they were “looking into this,” but did not enact any type of measurable response. Within three hours, Urban Outfitters lost 17,000 followers on Twitter and both #urbanoutfitters and #thieves were trending topics (Bhasin, 2012). Urban Outfitters ended up in hot water again in 2014 by running a “vintage sweatshirt” line that included a Kent State sweatshirt with what appeared to be bloodstains and bullet holes, a clear allusion to the 1970 campus shootings which resulted in the deaths of four students (Winchel, 2014). Urban Outfitters offered no apology and responded simply that everyone misunderstood the purpose of the sweatshirt (Wilson, 2014). On multiple occasions, Urban Outfitters produced offensive materials and then proceeded to offer no apology for their actions. While each of these events was ongoing, there was a sizeable conversation happening about the organization on social media platforms. Rather than engaging with key publics to address their concerns, Urban Outfitters remained silent and ignored the conversation. This repeated mismanagement of self-induced crisis events has created discontent with the company (Huddleston, 2014). The case study will examine how Urban Outfitters could have responded differently, and will explore how its communication practices could be more effective.

As a clothing company apparently seeking an image as edgy and different, Urban Outfitters has an unfortunate history of developing offensive products. Complaints about Urban Outfitters’

products go back more than a decade, with the 2003 launch of the game “Ghettopoly,” a Monopoly knockoff with content like “Cheap Trick Avenue” and “Smitty’s XXX Peep Show” (Controversies, 2015). The complaints continued unabated over the following years, as Urban Outfitters released products such as a shirt with a Palestinian boy carrying an AK-47 assault rifle and the word “victimized,” which produced backlash from members of the Jewish community who felt it was an open endorsement of terroristic activities (Controversies, 2015). In 2010 the company came under fire after selling a shirt marketed for young girls with the words “Eat Less” emblazoned across the front. That same year there was outrage when a clothing item was offered with the color options of “White/Charcoal” or “Obama/Black.” Urban Outfitters was sued by the Navajo nation in 2012 after ignoring a cease and desist order for using the name “Navajo” on a product line without first asking for permission from the Navajo nation (Fonseca, 2012). In addition to the problematic products listed here, there were a dozen different offensive or tactless products produced for and sold by Urban Outfitters from 2003 to 2015. Unlike the practices of Starbucks, mentioned previously, Urban Outfitters seemed to have no sense of the value of or need for developing social capital.

By September of 2014 Urban Outfitters had been out of the spotlight for producing offensive products for a few months and it seemed like the organization had, perhaps, turned a corner. Then, on September 15, 2014, they launched a line of “vintage college sweatshirts,” one of which was from Kent State University – and appeared to have blood stains and bullet holes (Ohlheiser, 2014). The Kent State sweatshirt seemed to be an intentional allusion to the mass shooting at the university often referred to as the “Kent State Massacre,” in which four students were killed and others were injured by National Guard troops responding to violent protests (Ohlheiser, 2014). Shortly after the sweatshirt was posted to the website, Urban Outfitters experienced strong negative responses

from the public, as well as a statement from Kent State indicating that the product was “beyond poor taste and trivializes a loss of life that still hurts the Kent State community today” (Ohlheiser, 2014, para. 5). Urban Outfitters responded to the negative publicity by releasing the following statement on Twitter (@UrbanOutfitters, 2014, September 15):

Urban Outfitters sincerely apologizes for any offense our Vintage Kent State Sweatshirt may have caused. It was never our intention to allude to the tragic events that took place at Kent State in 1970 and we are extremely saddened that this item was perceived as such. The one-of-a-kind item was purchased as part of our sun-faded vintage collection. There is no blood on this shirt nor has this item been altered in any way. The red stains are discoloration from the original shade of the shirt and the holes are from natural wear and fray. Again, we deeply regret that this item was perceived negatively and we have removed it immediately from our website to avoid further upset.

Disgruntled consumers went to Twitter to express their displeasure with this apology. On September 15 alone, @UrbanOutfitters was mentioned in more than 24,000 tweets – most of them negative. The sentiments of the tweets ranged from disbelief in the sincerity of the apology, to outright attacks on the company and the individuals responsible for the sweatshirt and the apology.

Recognizing their apology was not well received, Urban Outfitters released a follow-up apology on September 16 via TIME (Rothman, 2014):

Urban Outfitters would like to extend our sincerest apologies to Kent State University and the Kent State community. We are deeply saddened by the recent uproar our Vintage Kent State sweatshirt has caused. Though it was never our intention to offend anyone, we understand how the item could have been perceived negatively. The tragic events that took place in 1970 are not forgotten

and our company regrets that people believe we would intentionally make light of such a horrific part of our nation’s history. To promote such an event is disgraceful, insensitive and in poor taste. To further clarify, despite what has been reported, this is a vintage item and there is only one. Once the negative feedback was brought to our attention we removed the item immediately from sale. Urban Outfitters purchased the one-of-a-kind sweatshirt from the Rose Bowl Flea Market as part of our sun-faded vintage collection. There is no blood on the sweatshirt nor did we ever promote it as such. The discoloration that has been mistaken for blood is from natural fading and sun exposure. With all of that said, this truth does not excuse us from our failure to identify potential controversial products head on. We, as a company who caters to a college-age demographic, have a responsibility to uphold to our customers. Given our history of controversial issues, we understand how our sincerity may be questioned. We can only prove our commitment to improving our product-screening process through our actions and by holding ourselves accountable. Again, we sincerely apologize for this unfortunate misunderstanding and are dedicated to perfecting our internal processes to help avoid these issues in the future. (para. 5)

While the first apology was poorly received and not well thought out, the second apology is empathic and thoughtful. Urban Outfitters acknowledges that their credibility is at almost zero, especially because of their history of inappropriate, offensive products.

After this event one might think that Urban Outfitters had changed their policy on vetting potentially offensive products. On the contrary, in February of 2015 the company came under fire once again for producing a tapestry that was “‘eerily reminiscent’ of the holocaust” and of the clothing homosexual individuals were required to wear in concentration camps (Controversies, 2015, para. 2). Once again the company received criticism and backlash. In the short-term, Urban

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Outfitters lost followers on social media sites and received continued complaints about the products they were selling. On a more tangible scale, following the most recent rounds of product scandals Urban Outfitters' sales were down 7% (Hudleston, 2014). By continuing to pursue courses of action that yield short-term (and consistently negative) publicity, Urban Outfitters has sacrificed credibility, popularity, and profitability. The company has subjected itself to multiple crisis events, though each one was on a fairly small scale. Rather than addressing the conflict of these crises, Urban Outfitters offered token apologies and continued to act in a manner consistent with an organization uninterested in changing its practices. In this case, organizational communication related to the ongoing conflict is not only ineffective, but also nearly non-existent.

DiGiorno

In September of 2014, a video was released of Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Rice assaulting his then-fiancée, Janay Palmer, and dragging her out of an elevator (Kaplan, 2014). Once the video was made public, a woman named Beverly Gooden inadvertently started a social media activism campaign around the hashtag “#WhyIStayed.” She shared stories of her own abusive relationship as a show of support for women currently trapped in such a setting, and it quickly became an internationally trending topic, drawing stories from hundreds of supporters (Kaplan, 2014). A member of the DiGiorno Pizza social media team saw “#WhyIStayed” trending on Twitter and, without researching the meaning behind it, tweeted “#WhyIStayed because you had pizza.” The public outcry was immediate and intensely negative. Within four minutes of posting the tweet, DiGiorno had pulled the offending tweet and begun responding with a personalized apology to each person who tweeted about the event. The case study analysis will focus on DiGiorno's

personalized, thoughtful responses to each person who reached out to them, and lessons will be drawn to explore how other organizations can learn from DiGiorno's apologies.

Secrets are difficult to keep in today's society. People are under surveillance most of the time, especially in urban areas where businesses have security cameras, traffic lights have cameras, and almost every person walking down the street has a phone with a built in high-quality camera. It should have been no surprise to Ray Rice, then, that video of his assault on his then-fiancée (now wife) Janay Palmer would eventually be released. In February of 2014 Rice and Palmer were arrested on assault charges as the two had a public physical altercation (Bien, 2014). What was not known until September of 2014 was that while in an elevator, before they were arrested, Rice knocked Palmer unconscious then dragged her by her hair from the elevator (Bien, 2014). The video of the assault was shared widely over social media and traditional media outlets. Quickly, the conversation around the assault began to focus around the question, “Why did she [Palmer] stay?” (Kaplan, 2014). This message was troubling to Beverly Gooden, a woman who survived and eventually escaped from an abusive relationship (Kaplan, 2014). On September 8, the day the video of Rice's assault in the elevator was released, Gooden was so frustrated by the rhetoric suggesting Palmer “should have just left” that she went to Twitter and started sharing her own story using the hashtag “#WhyIStayed” (Kaplan, 2014). Gooden's tweets were as follows (@bevtgooden, 2014, September 8):

Domestic violence victims often find it difficult to leave abusers <http://www.blueridgenow.com/article/20120108/ARTICLES/120109857> ... #WhyIStayed

All these folks trashing women for staying in abusive situations have NO clue what happens the moment you reach for a door handle.

I tried to leave the house once after an abusive episode, and he blocked me. He slept in front of the door that entire night. #WhyIStayed

Gooden went on to list more than a dozen reasons why she stayed in the relationship, including “he said he would change,” and “my pastor told me God hates divorce” (@bevtgooden, 2014; Kaplan, 2014). Once Gooden began sharing her experiences, other people began to share their own stories using “#WhyIStayed.” Over the time that the hashtag was trending, thousands of abused individuals shared their stories of why they stayed in abusive relationships, offering support and encouragement to one another and to those similarly trapped.

Late in the day on September 8, someone on the DiGiorno Pizza social media team noticed that “Why I Stayed” was a trending topic. DiGiorno runs a humorous twitter account (@DiGiornoPizza) and often tweets about trending topics in order to connect with new Twitter users. In this instance, someone on the DiGiorno team jumped on board without first researching the purpose of the hashtag. They tweeted “#WhyIStayed you had pizza” (@DiGiorno, 2014, September 8 [tweet has been removed from the account]). Within a few minutes there were dozens of angry tweets targeting DiGiorno and the company’s apparent decision to try to sell pizza by capitalizing on a tragic event. A hashtag that was developed to support individuals in abusive relationships was now being coopted for free advertising.

Except, it seems that DiGiorno was not intentionally making light of the event. Four minutes after the #WhyIStayed tweet went out it was deleted and this follow up was broadcast: “A million apologies. Did not read what the hashtag was about before posting” (@DiGiornoPizza, 2014, September 8). Their response might seem disingenuous, but the apology did not stop at one tweet. Over the course of 24 hours there were hundreds of tweets. DiGiorno’s social media team went into high gear, apologizing by name to each

person who tweeted about DiGiorno’s mistake. Each apology was both personalized and targeted. The apology tweets did not use a copy-and-paste template or the same repeated verbiage. The apologies seemed heartfelt:

@Posietron I’m so sorry - I made the mistake of not investigating before posting. I saw it trending and participated. Never again.

@Starkman88 @Stareagle agreed. I made a mistake and couldn’t be more embarrassed or sorry.

@AllisonRockey Me either. It was a terrible lapse in judgment to not investigate the conversation before participating. I’m so sorry Allison

@ejbrooks @jordanbks It was. And I couldn’t be more sorry about it, Emma. Please accept my deepest apologies.

The apologies continued at the rate of a couple of apologies per minute from 11:15 pm until after one o’clock the following morning. Six hours later the apologies picked back up and continued all day on September 9. The DiGiorno account would apologize when someone tweeted about the offensive tweet, and then would apologize a second time if the person expressed further anger, dismay, disappointment, or concern.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the DiGiorno #WhyIStayed case is that within a few hours of the initial apology, individuals who were the first to criticize DiGiorno became DiGiorno’s champions, defending them against attacks by individuals who learned about the tweet well after the fact. One individual indicated they have made the same kind of mistake and appreciated DiGiorno owning their mistake: “@DiGiornoPizza apology ACCEPTED, #digior-nopizza !I never check hashtags before using them. #ApologyAccepted others need to #GetOverIt” (@allychat, 2014, September 11). Another person applauded the personalized apologies: “Props to

@DiGiornoPizza on personally apologize (sic) for a mistake. adweek.com/adfreak/digior...” (@The_Raheel, 2014, September 9). Other users went directly to countering attacks from other users: “@emitoms @DiGiornoPizza seriously? It’s the most apologetic acct ever. Never seen such remorse over an honest mistake. Leave the pizza alone” (@RealMikeWelch, 2014, September 9). Although this situation developed because of an insensitive and thoughtless action, DiGiorno’s leadership and social media team seems to have grasped the value of building social capital in the wake of the social media fallout.

The discussion on social media continued in this way for several days. While DiGiorno’s apologies to users who expressed their anger consisted of a few hundred tweets, the larger conversation over three days comprised more than 8,000 tweets. Much of the tweet traffic over that time was from users defending DiGiorno for their personalized apologies. By September 11, many outlets had published stories about the event with titles such as: *3 Ways DiGiorno Reacted Well to Their Twitter Crisis*; and *The Perfect Response to Social Media Crisis*. In this instance, DiGiorno’s self-inflicted crisis turned into an opportunity for effective communication and growth. The social media team was able to manage the ongoing conflict with upset Twitter users, all potential consumers of DiGiorno’s products, and was able to come through the event in a healthy and respectable position.

LESSONS FROM SUCCESS AND FAILURE

There is much to be learned from studying prior successes and failures, so that organizations can communicate more effectively in the future. As social media use spreads and consumers expect information more and more quickly, organizations will continue to create self-induced crisis events. By learning from organizations that have

weathered such events, both successfully and unsuccessfully, other organizations can prevent such events – and manage them more effectively when they occur. By drawing on the three case studies presented in this chapter, the author draws three major lessons from which organizations can learn and adapt. First, when a problem arises, organizations should respond quickly and openly. Second, organizations should acknowledge when they have done something wrong. Last, it is important for organizations to be part of the conversation when a conflict or crisis is ongoing, rather than ignoring the conversation and attempting to remain aloof.

Respond Quickly and Openly

When organizations encounter conflict with stakeholders during self-induced crisis events, the first lesson they should apply for managing the conflict is to respond quickly and openly. As Ulmer et al. (2015) demonstrate, stakeholders respond positively to being provided with relevant information in the midst of an uncertain situation. By responding quickly and providing the information stakeholders are seeking, organizations can maintain their credibility with their publics. Urban Outfitters damaged their credibility with key publics by communicating in a way that seemed obfuscating and less than genuine. Their first apology seemed hollow, referred to by many Twitter users as a “non-apology apology.” Had Urban Outfitters taken a more open, apologetic stance from the outset, they likely would not have needed to issue a second, follow-up apology.

Acknowledge Mistakes

The initial tendency when faced with an unexpected challenge or organizational error is often for the organization to distance itself from the event and seek firm footing for legal defense. Starbucks appeared to seek distance from negative reactions to the Race Together campaign by choosing not to engage in dialogue on social media platforms.

Urban Outfitters attempted to distance itself from public outrage over the sale of the Kent State sweatshirt by insisting that their intent had been misinterpreted. DiGiorno's approach of quickly acknowledging their mistake and working for several days to express their regrets is an effective model for responding to this type of event. One need only look to past crisis events to see that this approach has proven effective.

Consider the oil spill that took place off the coast of Huntington Beach, California, in 1990. The spill happened a few months after the Exxon Valdez spill at a time when "oil spill fervor was at its height" (Sandman, 2012). The ship was leased by British Petroleum, but was operated by a contract shipper. The CEO of BP America was asked in a press conference whether the spill was BP's fault. The CEO responded, "Our lawyers tell us it is not our fault. But we feel like it is our fault, and we are going to act like it is our fault" (Sandman, 2012, p. 67). As a result of their forthright response and quick cleanup "BP's image in the vicinity of the spill is higher today than it was before the spill" (Sandman, 2012, p. 67). The response by BP was so successful that the Huntington Beach spill has nearly disappeared from popular memory, while the Exxon Valdez spill the year before remains a well-known and oft-discussed piece of history. Acknowledging mistakes on the front end creates time and space for organizations to rebuild credibility, and allows key publics time to forgive the mistake and move on.

Participate in Relevant Conversations

In an increasingly high-speed communication environment, one of the most damaging moves an organization can make is to simply avoid being part of the conversation. For example, airline customers use Twitter and Facebook to express complaints or to get up-to-date information on arrival times and gate changes. Airline representatives acknowledge that social media platforms,

such as Twitter, are becoming more and more relevant (Carrington, 2013).

When the Kent State sweatshirt was put up for sale Urban Outfitters remained aloof from the social media conversation, implicitly indicating that the company could not be bothered to respond to the criticism and complaints of its customers. While the Race Together campaign was ongoing, the official Starbucks and Starbucks News Twitter accounts were largely silent. Frustrated or disgruntled customers went to social media to engage with the company and ask legitimate questions about the campaign. In the best-case scenario, these individuals were ignored. In the worst-case scenario, many of the people asking questions were blocked by Starbucks' leadership and were therefore unable to receive a clear answer to their questions. DiGiorno, following a major social media gaffe, moved quickly to take part in the rapidly developing conversation around its message. DiGiorno's decision to remain engaged in the conversation resulted in acceptance from a large portion of the individuals who were angered by their tweet, as well as eventual positive press for how they handled the event.

Organizations using social media to connect with stakeholders must remember the power of social-media messaging to benefit as well as to damage credibility and organizational relationships. Organizations should utilize social media platforms to engage with stakeholders in meaningful ways. Specifically, social media platforms should be used to engage in effective conflict management with internal and external stakeholders. The flexibility and unprecedented reach of social media can be used to connect with key publics at an incredible pace. Engaging in productive dialogue that once would have required town hall meetings or similar face-to-face interactions can now, in part, be managed in an online forum. While press releases, email Listservs, and newsletters allow for only one-way communication, social media platforms now allow organizational members to effectively engage in dialogue with key publics.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter explores how organizations can prepare for, respond to, and manage the conflict of self-induced crisis events. This study is far from exhaustive, and should serve as a launching point for research in related areas. First, further studies should be conducted of other organizations that have undergone similar events and faced similar crises. Studying a larger sample of organizations will enhance the understanding researchers have of these phenomena and how they can be managed effectively. Additionally, it would be helpful to connect with social media users who have taken part in the conversation around social-media based responses to organizational conflict and self-induced crises. By surveying users who have been involved in these events researchers can determine whether preliminary findings are consistent over a much larger population than can be determined in an interview or case study. Future research should seek to expand both the breadth and depth of the current study.

CONCLUSION

This chapter consisted of three parts. First, the author reviewed relevant literature. Next, the author conducted a comparative case study of three distinct self-inflicted crisis events: first, the Starbucks “Race Together” campaign (Hensley & Blau, 2015); second, the ineffective response from Urban Outfitters following the production of offensive products (The Week, 2015); and finally, the mistaken tweet sent by the DiGiorno account which misused the “#WhyIStayed” hashtag (Griner, 2014). Lastly, the chapter concluded with lessons learned from the case studies, a set of principles to inform organizations managing this type of organizational conflict, and proposed directions for future research.

A new area of organizational risk has developed as a direct result of increased organizational

engagement on social media platforms. The possibility for organizations to create a self-inflicted crisis through the unintentional transmission of a poorly worded or ill-conceived social media message is one that should not be ignored or minimized. Self-induced crisis events create organizational conflict that must be managed quickly. As was witnessed with the Starbucks case, and somewhat after the fact in the DiGiorno case, there is much to be said for organizations developing social capital and a “reservoir of goodwill” (Ulmer et al., 2015) with their publics. As was made clear by the Urban Outfitters case, and to a lesser extent by Starbucks, it is vital that organizations not leave a communication void. When there is a void it will tend to be filled, and in the midst of a developing crisis that void could be filled by misinformation and speculation. It is important for organizations to steer the conversation as much as possible. By adopting the practices suggested in this chapter, organizations can pursue a more engaged, connected relationship with key stakeholders.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Conflict: A state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests between people working together.

Crisis: A specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high priority goals.

Hashtag: (On social media sites such as Twitter) a word or phrase preceded by a hash or pound sign (#) and used to identify messages on a specific topic.

Micro-Blog: Social networking sites that allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links.

Social Media: Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

Social Networking Sites: Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Twitter: The largest micro-blogging site on the Internet, with over 302 million active monthly users.