

“*Plus Ça Change*” Exercise: What Were They Doing?

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If you look back at crises of the past, you find plenty of bad examples – and some good examples – of crisis communication principles at work. The principles don’t change, and obeying them doesn’t come naturally; it has to be learned.

For each numbered item, try to identify which of our 25 recommendations is being followed or not followed. Most are examples of several recommendations at once. As you complete the exercise, notice that the good examples sound fairly normal ... as normal as the bad examples. Good crisis communication can feel wooden at first. But to the audience it sounds fine.

The flu pandemic of 1918:

1. In 1918, after a devastating influenza outbreak at Fort Reilly, Kansas, there was another horrific outbreak at Ford Devens, Massachusetts. Civilians in Boston started dying of the flu. But in New York City, Health Commissioner Royal Copeland said: “The city is in no danger of an epidemic. No need for our people to worry.” Officials everywhere were slow to take steps to discourage war rallies, parades, and other large gatherings. In San Francisco, health official William Hassler expressed optimism that the flu would not reach the west coast. Medical historians write that officials like Copeland and Hassler downplayed alarming news to avoid scaring people.
2. Eventually the epidemic reached – and overwhelmed – San Francisco. Schools were closed and large public gatherings were banned. Retirees, housewives, and other members of the public were called on to volunteer to help the sick. Searching for a way to reassure the public, officials grossly oversold such ineffective preventive measures as gauze masks. San Francisco’s mayor proclaimed: “A Mask Is 99% Proof Against Influenza.”

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3. “Influenza 1918,” a PBS TV program, describes a false “end” of San Francisco’s flu epidemic: “Siren wails on November 21, 1918 signaled to San Franciscans that it was safe, and legal, to remove their masks. All signs indicated that the flu had abated. Schools re-opened, and theaters sought to make back the \$400,000 they had lost during each of the six weeks they were closed.” Two weeks later another flu wave broke out.

The Perrier contamination crisis of 1990

4. In February 1990, an environmental testing laboratory in North Carolina found benzene in a bottle of Perrier water purchased at a local grocery store. (The lab had been using Perrier as a test standard for analyzing the local water supply.) Within a day, company spokespeople announced that French officials had assured them the benzene wasn’t from contamination of the underground spring from which Perrier water was drawn. They said they suspected the contamination came from the bottling, packaging, or distribution process, but they weren’t certain; “we think we know, but we are not going to say unless we are 100 percent sure.” The problem was confined to a small number of samples, they said, and the recall of Perrier was limited to the U.S. and Canada.
5. Within another day, company spokespeople had told the New York Times that new tests showed the underground spring was pure and unpolluted. The benzene, they said, probably came from a cleanser mistakenly used to clean machinery connected to bottles sent only to North America. Perrier had dealt with the problem. “We have no fear.... The source plant is working normally.... All tests are fine.... This is a freak accident.” Perrier stated that it expected its balance sheet would not be affected. Over and over, spokespeople repeated that the Perrier spring in southern France was not tainted.

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6. On day three of the story, the New York Times ran an editorial praising Perrier’s aggressive and open response, contrasting it with Exxon’s arrogant response to public concern after the Valdez spill. But the next day the Times reported that the company’s story had changed. It now said the contamination was caused “when company employees failed to replace charcoal filters that screen out benzene, a chemical impurity in the natural gas present in the company’s famous spring in southern France.”

7. On day five benzene was found in Perrier bottles in Europe. Company officials began to reveal that it used natural gas to add carbonation to water from its underground source, that benzene was a naturally occurring contaminant in the gas, and that the filters that were supposed to screen out the benzene hadn’t been changed for months. They did not acknowledge the discrepancy between this and its previous explanations, or between this and the public’s previous understanding of what “natural spring water” was supposed to be. Announcing a worldwide recall of all Perrier water, Chairman Gustave Leven said this was why: “I don’t want the least doubt, however small, to tarnish our product’s image of quality and purity.”

The Belgian dioxin contamination of 1999:

8. Early in 1999, officials in Belgium discovered that dioxin-contaminated industrial oil had been mixed with animal fat and used in 80,000 kilograms of animal feed. It kept the story secret for over a month, on the grounds that it wanted to find out if the feed had gotten into the human food supply before telling the public anything. Presumably the government was hoping to find that there was no food supply contamination, so that when the public heard about the feed contamination there would be very little alarm. If so, the strategy boomeranged. Even after the story broke, the extent of the cover-up emerged only gradually; it eventually brought down the government.

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9. At the end of May, Belgian officials revealed part of the story, the contamination of chickenfeed. Belgian citizens were outraged at the delay in telling them about the problem. So were trading partners; the EU discussed imposing some kind of sanctions against Belgium. But the German minister of agriculture defended the long time lag, saying “The Belgians weren’t sure about the impact of the case.”

10. The Belgian government said Belgians should not eat chickens or eggs until further notice, but insisted: “This matter only affects chickens and eggs.” A few days later, it was revealed that dioxin-contaminated feed had been sold and fed to cattle as well, in countries beyond Belgium. Belgian authorities said they had informed the French agriculture minister about the cattle feed contamination five weeks earlier. The French minister retorted that the message he had received from the Belgians had been “reassuring and banal.” The public, of course, had received no message at all. The controversy over the cover-up continued to escalate. Aside from toppling the Government of Belgium, it led to massive recalls, culls, and import bans as people translated the cover-up into a higher level of health concern, necessitating a higher level of precaution-taking.

And miscellaneous other crises:

11. In 1865-67, a cattle plague was spreading across western Europe. Taking the issue more seriously than other countries, Belgium closed its borders to imported cattle and restricted trade fairs. It lost very few cattle compared with England and Holland. Rather than trumpeting its success, Belgium instead insisted on the need for extreme vigilance in the face of continuing uncertainty. Interior minister Van Denpeereboom said: “It is not impossible that some isolated cases may still appear [in our country]. Those fears are only too much by the experience of the past; they must make us persistent in the measures of precaution and vigilance which have enabled us to escape until now ... the ravages of a pestilence whose victims are counted elsewhere by thousands.”

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12. In 1939, with Germany threatening to invade Great Britain, the Ministry of Home Security put up posters headlined, “If the Invader comes – what to do and how to do it.” The posters asserted that “the invaders will be driven out by our Navy, our Army, and our Air Force,” but also insisted that “the ordinary men and women of the civilian population will also have their part to play.” Included in the instructions: “In factories and shops, all managers and workmen should organise some system now by which a sudden attack can be resisted.

13. In 1979, the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in central Pennsylvania suffered a serious accident. In mid-crisis, while many things were still going wrong, the utility put out a news release claiming that the reactor was “cooling according to design.” Months later, a company official was asked how he could justify such a statement. He explained that nuclear power plants are designed to cool even when serious mistakes have been made. Despite his company’s mistakes – and even though at the time of the news release many of the mistakes had not yet been acknowledged – he said it was therefore truthful to say that the plant was cooling according to design

14. In 1982, several people died in Chicago after taking cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules. Johnson & Johnson recalled all Tylenol in the U.S., not just in the Chicago area. It pulled its ads and urged people not to take Tylenol. The CEO went on television to warn people, and to apologize – taking responsibility for having packaging that was insufficiently tamper-proof.

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15. In 1989, the Exxon Valdez tanker ran aground on Bligh Reef in Alaska, spilling huge quantities of oil into the ocean. As the oil found its way onto shore (and into animals and fish), reactions of anger and disgust were widespread. Exxon officials were slow to visit the site, and slower to take the blame. Exxon statements pointed to the company’s excellent safety record, blamed the accident on employees, and argued strenuously that the long-term damage would be minimal, a point hotly debated among experts. Several years later an elaborate Exxon environmental exhibit at the Disney World Epcot Center still made no mention of the Valdez spill.

16. In 1994, India suffered an outbreak of plague in southern Gujarat state. In less than a week, about 500,000 residents of the Gujarat city of Surat fled their homes. The “Surat panic” is widely cited as a rare but impressive example of the evils of panics. But the plague had begun not in Surat but in Beed, a rural part of Maharashtra state. Officials had downplayed the Beed epidemic, telling journalists that everything was under control and rumors of plague were “wildly exaggerated.” They were trying to prevent panic; instead, they helped cause a wider plague and a wider panic.

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Answers:

1. Don't over-reassure; acknowledge uncertainty; don't aim for zero fear; err on the alarming side; tell people what to expect [bad example].
2. Ask more of people; offer people things to do [good example]. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths; don't over-reassure [bad example].
3. Err on the alarming side [bad example].
4. Don't over-reassure; don't lie, and don't tell half-truths [bad example]. Acknowledge uncertainty [good example]. Note that this is not a good example of being willing to speculate, because the speculation is over-optimistic.
5. Err on the alarming side; don't over-reassure; establish your own humanity; don't lie, and don't tell half-truths [bad example]. Once again, the speculation is over-optimistic.
6. Acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; be explicit about “anchoring frames” [bad example].
7. Be explicit about changes in official opinion, prediction, or policy; be explicit about “anchoring frames”; acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; legitimize people's fears [bad example].
8. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths; aim for total candor and transparency [bad example].

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9. Aim for total candor and transparency; be willing to speculate [bad example].
10. Don't over-reassure; don't lie, and don't tell half-truths; apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors [bad example].
11. Err on the alarming side; acknowledge uncertainty; don't aim for zero fear [good example].
12. Ask more of people; let people choose their own actions; offer people things to do [good example].
13. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths; don't over-reassure [bad example].
14. Err on the alarming side; legitimize people's fears; apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors [good example].
15. Apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; acknowledge opinion diversity; don't forget emotions other than fear.
16. Don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic; don't over-reassure; don't aim for zero fear; tolerate people's fears; aim for total candor and transparency [bad example].

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

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