

CASE STUDY #3

Outrage Management 2.0 and Beyond



There is a growing awareness of the need for organisations to connect more strategically and authentically with communities affected by their operations. This assists organisations to constantly cultivate – and protect – their reputation. An obvious example of this is the appreciation leading organisations now have that their CSR or sustainability programs cannot be purely a marketing exercise; positive outcomes for social and environmental causes are now expected by the wider society. Otherwise, the approaches are seen for the inauthentic efforts that they are.

Yet, countless organisations still struggle to comprehend how their operations and staff behaviour can leave stakeholders aggrieved or worse, outraged.

My time chairing numerous stakeholder management workshops and conferences has given me a big-picture confirmation of what is required to protect organisations' reputations.

Firstly, through gaining a true understanding of the context, organisations will be enabled to start the journey towards making a positive impact within affected communities. That is always significant learning for client organisations – irrespective of the sector they represent – in understanding why their organisations struggle to overcome community resistance.

Organisations too often view situations solely from their own perspective. However, by deepening relationships with concerned stakeholders, particularly those you would rather avoid, different perspectives on issues can be unearthed and 'dangerous' assumptions within an organisation can be debunked.

Accordingly, organisations can experience an epiphany, appreciating that stakeholders actually feel that a controversial issue is controlled by the organisation alone, is unfamiliar, or leaves them with dread. Alternatively, there may be a realisation that the organisation, itself, has not been trusted or commonly, not responsive.

This allows for the design and delivery of a more effective and engaging strategic direction.

Secondly, there is a need for client organisations to develop a stakeholder engagement narrative for their organisations that can be understood and engage the affected, internally and externally. All too often, organisations are hampered by an inability to take a strategic approach, instead creating incoherent action plans that aim to do too much and yet, achieve too little. Strategy involves making difficult choices about where effort will be focussed (or alternatively, not focussed) to achieve the best results with limited staff, time and money.

And a strategy needs to be moulded into a narrative because too often, no one understands the strategic direction and where effort should be directed. Don't ever understate the power of stories!

Oh and understanding the context discussed above also helps organisations to develop a strategy that has the right fit with the 'inside' and 'outside' environments in which they operate, thereby positioning organisations as effectively as possible to successfully meet their challenges.

Otherwise their organisations' cultures could eat a narrative or strategy for breakfast.

I've worked with many clients who have viewed their organisations as having cultures that could be characterised as being internally focussed and placed too much importance on control and order (a hierarchical culture). These are the antithesis of the values and mindsets required for resolving outrage challenges; instead, organisations need truly have an external focus, being dynamic and most importantly, flexible and adaptive. But, it is not easy to instigate behaviours that contradict the norm. It requires real commitment from a company's leaders.

Employing compassion and empathy will also help organisations facilitate external engagement. Dealing with outrage is never easy. And sometimes it is just too confusing to understand what stakeholders are really after.

Those experiencing outrage have come to that emotion for at least one reason. And more often than not, it is the behaviour of an organisation that has created that situation. So, participants strongly connected with the importance of trying to see things from the viewpoint of the affected; put yourself in their shoes and compassionately try and unearth their values by taking a genuine interest in them.

And appreciating the implications of sharing control is paramount. This is always identified as being a significant challenge for client organisations. Client organisations often seem to place great stock on control and stability. For such cultures, sharing control in order to build trust with outraged stakeholders is not only scary, but also flies in the face of everything their organisation does.

In such cases, organisations may need to become very methodical when it comes to involving stakeholders. Because through taking a collaborative, empowering approach, they can instead make a truly positive impact – to the communities affected as well as to organisational reputation and performance.



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