

Why the CEO should be the spokesperson during a crisis

 By [Regine le Roux](#)

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Who should take responsibility when things go wrong? Who should apologise to disgruntled stakeholders? Who should explain to the media what happened? The answer to these questions seems like a simple one - the CEO of course!



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Unfortunately, this is not the answer some CEOs would like to give. Far too often leaders seem to duck and dive from the responsibility of speaking to the media when a crisis hits. Curiously they are “unavailable for comment” or “could not be reached for comment.” They may choose rather to delegate the somewhat difficult task of taking responsibility and apologising for a problem to someone else in the business.

The captain of a ship

If the CEO is missing, the first question everyone will ask is, ‘What could be more important?’ Other questions that start to fly when there is a no-show from the CEO are: ‘Why isn’t the CEO speaking out about this? Where is the CEO now?’ Next, they may want to know what the CEO may be ‘hiding’ from and why can’t the CEO play open cards with stakeholders. These questions seem to figuratively add fuel to the fire during a crisis and can infuriate people who are already quite disgruntled.

Think of the CEO as the captain of a ship. People want to know who is steering the ship and they want to know that the captain is a person who leads by example, with values that are aligned to the company. The captain has got to walk the talk, own up to mistakes and apologise on behalf of the crew. The captain should explain how the entire ship will avoid a similar crisis in future and what practical steps are being taken in this regard.



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If the captain cannot steer the ship through a crisis, then it is quite likely that the crew will lose faith in their leader too. They, together with other stakeholder groups will begin to ask who is really at the helm of this ship? And the last thing you

want is your top employers jumping ship.

Suitable appointed spokesperson

A CEO that speaks to media during a crisis has the ability to send a clear message; whether it is to apologise for a mistake or to empathise with those who are affected by a disaster. The CEO is also best placed to speak because they are most likely the most well informed and know the facts of the matter. Any other person may not have the delegated authority to speak as clearly on behalf of the organisation. The CEO can use the crisis as an opportunity to set an example, know the facts and be available to speak to the media.

With that said, the CEO need not always be the appointed spokesperson for normal external communication. It is true that the financial director may be better placed to respond to financial questions or perhaps media may want to speak to the human resources manager regarding an employee skills program, for example. Ultimately, it makes sense to have more than one spokesperson ready to speak to media, in case the appointed person is out of the country or sick. However, during a crisis, the CEO should most certainly be the official spokesperson.



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Contrary to the misguided belief that one can't prepare for a crisis, you can make plans to avert the worst of a crisis with the following simple steps. Applying these actions to your business could make the world of difference:

1. Invest in media training: Of course, CEOs may well be appointed because of their excellent business skills, ability to lead the team and vision for the future. They may not feel too confident in the hot seat or facing a barrage of journalist queries, so it is vitally important that they are equipped with the skills they need before the crisis hits. Investing in a media training session can help prepare company spokespeople for the hardest of questions and with practical tips for staying cool in a crisis. If you consider how a two-minute live media interview could make or break one's reputation during a crisis, you'd also prioritise media training.

2. Have a crisis communication strategy in place: When a complaint on Twitter has been retweeted 100 times, it is too late to arrange a meeting to plan how to respond. Having a crisis communication plan in place ahead of time means that everyone knows how to act and no one runs around like a headless chicken trying to figure out what to do. Importantly, this plan will detail who responds to the media, which approvals need to be gained before a statement is issued, which stakeholders are informed and in what order. For example, all employees would need to be informed of the facts surrounding a crisis and reminded that they are not allowed to comment to media. All corporate messages should be communicated through one official spokesperson in an official capacity where a holding statement and response is prepared timeously.

3. Agree on a social media policy: Contrary to the idea of separating one's private life from work life, social media is the great equaliser and so it is true that you are what you tweet. Tweeting in your 'personal capacity' makes no difference to those following you – they will judge your professional behaviour according to your personal behaviour and personal tweets. Having a social media policy in place means that all employees know what they can post on social networks and what is beyond scope. This can help avert a crisis and avoid the organisation's name being dragged into the 'mudslinging' that can take place online.

4. Conduct reputation research: Knowing what stakeholders think of you can help you to address areas of the business that could be improved. Conducting Reputation Research helps you to be a lot more proactive at identifying potential crises and risks, and help you to be more strategic about resolving them ahead of time. Investing in this kind of research regularly can help you to pinpoint what exactly is building up or breaking down one's reputation and you have the benefit of comparing your reputation score over time.

ABOUT REGINE LE ROUX

Regine is a reputation specialist. She founded Reputation Matters in 2005; where they measure and manage companies' reputations using their unique Repudometer® measurement tool.

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