

Communication strategies for imperial metals



Literature Review

Imperial Metals – Mount Polley Mine Disaster

Communication Strategies

Introduction

Imperial Metals is a mining company headquartered in Vancouver, British Columbia. Their mining operations are in British Columbia, as well. On August 4th, 2014, a massive dam burst at tailings impoundment near Mount Polley mine, letting 14.5 million cubic meters of toxic heavy metals, chemical laden sludge, and woody debris into Polley Lake. This caused the lake level to rise 1.7 metres higher than its regular levels. Polley Lake water runs into Quesnel Lake and then into the Quesnel River. Imperial Metals reported this incident by means of news outlets, press releases on their website, articles written on websites such as Yahoo Finance, interviews with Globe News Wire & Global News, and conducted follow-up technical reports on their website during the clean-up, rehabilitation, and restoration phases. The chosen communication strategies used by Imperial Metals in the wake of the Mount Polley mine disaster was to keep the public up to date with facts regarding the actual devastation it caused and its impending and current rehabilitation and restoration phases. Imperial Metal's communications' outreach has resulted in seven public meetings in the local communities where tours of the mine were hosted, and stakeholder communication is continuously and consistently ongoing.

Corporate Responsibility. Given the hazardous characteristic of the mining industry, Imperial Metals has done well with developing a communication

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strategy that is regularly kept up to date. It maintains a regular output of Press Releases on its website for information dissemination purposes. Lordan (2015) stated:

Every business should develop, test and regularly update its crisis communications plan. Mining is an inherently dangerous industry, and even the most proactive and safety-conscious mining companies must prepare for the possibility of a disaster that will test the communication function of the organization. Ultimately, however, there is a limitation on what a communications program can achieve: an organization that flaunts safety standards and puts employees at risk can not be saved by public relations — nor should it be. Public relations programs, including crisis communications plans, reflect the overall integrity and civic performance of the organization as a whole (p. 12).

A Matter of Priority. Imperial Metals already has a crisis communication plan in place because it knows that it is needed in such a dangerous industry as mining. Holland (2006) explained: “ If a crisis occurred tomorrow, 80 percent said they believe implementation of crisis communication plans would help limit the overall negative impact on their businesses.” (p. 24). In most cases there will be information leaked to news outlets or media, about the catastrophic event from an internal source to the company. The information that is leaked in this manner is not always accurate either. Baron (2016) wrote: “ That being said, information leaks from the command center and rumors from a variety of sources are a part of communication reality. Part of the information officer’s plan must be to deal quickly with rumors” (p. 14).

This also must be taken into consideration when devising a company's communication strategies.

Disaster Recovery. Shaffer (2006) wrote: " While disasters will vary, navigating the path of crisis communications hasn't changed since the advent of the 24-hour news cycle. News travels fast whether it's true or false and often follows the path of least resistance if not managed properly" (p. 32). Looking shell-shocked or indecisive on-screen does not reassure your members. Closing the window blinds when the media show up is a big mistake that could easily be portrayed by the others that you are not in charge or in control. Their trust in you will rapidly go away. On the other hand, Martin (2015) stated: " The data, like any, come with imperfections but provide an opportunity to examine patterns after the initial media interest and conventional wisdom have moved on to other topics" (p. 14). This leaves the data which was communicated, open to scrutiny after the initial shock has worn down. It is then of the utmost importance to broadcast the entire truth, not just the truth that you wish for others to see, as this can also backfire on the company.

The Norm. When a company is deep-seated in a dangerous or risky environment, like that of the mining industry, it becomes part of their norm to experience catastrophic events (death, serious injuries, environmental, etc.). Brune (2014) wrote: " In a safety culture where deviance from established norms has become normality, it becomes difficult for an operator or government inspectors to recognize major safety hazards and to mitigate them" (p. 40-41). It is very important for the company's communications to remain grounded with the remainder of society and in what it believes to be

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acceptable, when communicating disasters of catastrophic proportions. In an article written by a BC correspondent, Lee (2014) wrote:

Tailings-pond leaks are rare, but they do happen: On average, three leaks occur every year worldwide. In B. C. alone, there are about 130 mines, each with at least one tailings pond, the default way of storing and disposing of mine waste “ since the beginning of time,” said Scott Dunbar, the head of the University of British Columbia’s mining engineering program. “ It’s a fact of life.” Reports say Canada’s previous case came last October, when a tailings pond that was in the reclamation process leaked at the Obed Mountain mine in Alberta, losing 670, 000 cubic metres of coal tailings into the Athabasca River (p. 24-25).

It is far too important of being grounded in what the norm is or should be in these instances. Society will not receive this message and accept that environmental disasters created by the mining industry is simply “ normal”, this could lead to protests and frustration for those affected directly or indirectly. This should always be reflected in the company’s communication strategies.

Cost. Great communication strategies will also alleviate the possibly hefty cost for repairing the ensuing negative public relations. Lee (2015) wrote:

But if effectively doing nothing becomes the plan — Imperial has been given until Friday to file a report — it will further accentuate the perception of negligence on the part of Imperial by environmental groups. The damage — and it was devastating, especially at its epi-centre — is also making it hard to move beyond the images to get to the facts and realities of the cleanup. “

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This is one of those horrible situations where you're damned if you do, damned if you don't," says Caldwell. " I suppose, in this democracy, you're just going to have to have a discussion to decide which is the lesser of the two evils" (p. 24-25).

It is always difficult to remove the mental images of environmental disaster from peoples' minds. It needs to be done very carefully, but facts need to be communicated by the company and it needs to be done quickly. The last thing people want to be communicated by the company, is how worse it would have been if the incident had occurred at another location or from another source, for example. In an interview with Imperial Metals Corporation public relations officer, McCampbell (2015) wrote:

" Even though Mount Polley was one of the biggest environmental disasters in Canadian history, the impact would be much worse from a catastrophic failure at a project like Red Chris and KSM [Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell] that are acid- draining, with much larger tailings impoundments," he says (p. 6).

Deflection at its worse.

Conclusion

While the articles used in this research agree that it is a matter of priority and of corporate responsibility of the businesses themselves to create proper channels of crisis communication plans, it is crucial to realize that not all businesses believe this to be of great importance (Lordan 2015). The communication strategies used by companies in the wake of a disaster or catastrophic event will not only reflect their integrity but will also limit the negative public relations impact on their business (Holland, 2006). The <https://assignbuster.com/communication-strategies-for-imperial-metals/>

downside to communication is that there can also be a negative impact if the company over-advertises false information about just how safety conscious they are and an incident still occurs afterwards (Lordan 2015). Finding an appropriate multi-channel communication strategy of information while mitigating any internal rumours (Baron 2016), is very important in situations of catastrophic proportions for any business. Company's who deal in high risk management should be conscious of what should be considered a normal amount of fatalities and appropriately communicate them without raising the bar on what is considered normal and while avoiding deflection.

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