

Effective Communication in Crisis Situations

Sarah Sawyer: Welcome to this week's OK at Work with myself, Sarah Sawyer, and my colleague Russell Berger, both attorneys at Offit Kurman. And today we are talking about what to do when your company or organization goes through something that maybe draws attention from the news or from the community or the public or your customer base, and people might be reaching out for comment.

And they will be looking for someone to comment and just give one of those offhand comments that they think doesn't mean anything, and then turns into a big news story. I mean, people have heard of those things happening, and sometimes, news reporters might be poking around, calling different employees at the different levels, asking about what's going on with whatever incident it might be.

What are some things that companies should be thinking about when something like that is happening Russell?

Russell Berger: Yeah. Well, so as a starting point before... You should think about it before it becomes an issue. I [00:01:00] mean, like a lot of things, if you wait until there's a fire to buy the insurance, you're coming to it a little bit too late.

So I think it's important to have a crisis communication plan, and to have, identified, who the point person is what the vetting process is going to be, how are messages going to be communicated internally versus externally. I think those are good things to have in place.

And just broadly, like crisis or not, like in any organization, I think good communication is important, and having plans and processes for communicating across a large number of people is gonna be really helpful. I think we've talked about your general communication plan here in the past.

I think that's really important. A second thing is when there is that hot button issue consult an expert. If you don't have it internally, there are consultants that specialize in this sort of thing. And they can be very valuable resources, to those of us that aren't super familiar with how to handle these things 'cause they're not part of our everyday jobs.

Sarah Sawyer: Yeah, and depending [00:02:00] on the incident too, there might be something that employees, it might repla- even if it's an external issue, let's say, there might be something that it brings out in an employee. So the employee might say, ""Hey now that this thing has happened, I have some thoughts about something else that happened," or, "I wanna talk about this," or, "I have concerns."

And so I think it's also important to, in addition to having a plan in place for what the employee should or shouldn't be doing, who they should be referring any inquiries to, who can speak on behalf of the company and who can't. It's also important to support the employees who might be concerned about what's happening, and provide them internal resources, and remind them of hopefully the processes you already have in place for reporting things like whistleblower policies, HR complaints, and those types of things.

'Cause sometimes something that happens and gets a lot of news attention, it could be internal, it could be external, and it could bring up concerns or could unearth some other issues that might be going on or some concerns employees might have. So I [00:03:00] think that's an important piece to think about it as well, because you've gotta be strong on making sure that you have a good policy around keeping your information confidential and kinda circling the wagons, so to speak, without making employees feel like they don't have access or they don't have support or they don't have those normal areas of reporting and people to go to ask questions.

And that'll really help on the practical side of making sure that employees comply with those policies and directives.

Russell Berger: Yeah. And it raised an important point that, whatever's going on, like you gotta keep running your business. You can't stop doing the things that you do, otherwise the whole, thing collapses on itself.

So you've gotta be in a position to do that, which means you've gotta be able to speak, honestly and directly with your workforce. And, given the situation, there may be right ways and wrong ways to do that, and there might be things you should say, you shouldn't say, you can't say.

But you should get guidance on that and figure that out so that you can share what is appropriate to [00:04:00] share and, make sure, the people that are going to continue to power the organization are, more or less informed and still in a position to help you move forward as an organization.

Sarah Sawyer: Yeah. All good points, and good to just take a breath, stay steady and figure out a good plan even in the worst of circumstances, 'cause these can be stressful situations for sure.

Russell Berger: We've been saying that for six years on OK at Work.

Sarah Sawyer: It's a common theme, I'd say. Well, thanks Russell, we'll see you next time.

Russell Berger: Thanks, Sarah.