DEALING WITH CONFLICTS AND CRISES

Study Notes
Dealing with Conflicts and Crises

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LESSON 1: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
IDENTIFYING CONFLICT TRIGGERS

There are numerous triggers that can lead to conflict in the workplace. Leaders should recognize these triggers, and work to eliminate or manage them effectively.

Culture or leadership style

When team members and employees are openly or even secretly punished or blamed for mistakes, defending themselves becomes a high priority. A common response to being challenged is to deny responsibility, shift the blame, or even lie. When such defenses stop having the desired effect or others feel blamed or accused unfairly, conflicts are inevitable.

As a leader, it’s essential that you refuse to buy into or encourage such a climate. Remember, making mistakes cannot be prevented by rules and restrictions. They can be minimized though, or even turned to your advantage by becoming learning or training opportunities. Always encourage and support your staff.

Favoritism

Perceived favoritism, or unfair and unequal treatment, can take many forms. It could be either open and blatant, or secretive and subtle, and all shades in between. The fact that laws exist to address unfair treatment does not prevent its appearance. When employees or team members see others receiving either preferential or unfair treatment, gossip tends to flourish, respect is lost, and eventually protests and arguments may arise.

There are situations where people and their managers do not consciously set out to behave unfairly. Instead, it’s a case of lack of attention or ignorance of others’ needs leading to others feeling pain. Encourage an atmosphere of respect and appreciation. And always be vigilant and prepared to act quickly when complaints of unfair treatment arise.

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There are situations where people and their managers do not consciously set out to behave unfairly. Instead, it’s a case of lack of attention or ignorance of others’ needs leading to others feeling pain. Encourage an atmosphere of respect and appreciation. And always be vigilant and prepared to act quickly when complaints of unfair treatment arise.

Remember, there are specific behaviors that can fuel conflict. Developing, as a leader, a habit of vigilance, and of avoiding or refusing to tolerate these behaviors, reduces the likelihood of conflict arising.

Being judgmental

This is unfortunately a common personal style, where individuals judge others, and even themselves, in ways that generate unpleasant feelings. Indeed, it is almost a reflection of life today, where education, politics, news and social media outlets make criticism and harsh judgment their stock in trade. It is a social habit. Even performance management systems drift commonly to judging employees’ performance, often in terms of what is lacking. Feeling judged, especially when it seems unfairly, provokes the same defensive routines typical of blame cultures.

Making disrespectful remarks

Disrespectful remarks and gossip will often arise from being judgmental about colleagues. A person openly making disrespectful remarks about colleagues is easy to spot. As a leader, you must challenge and prevent this behavior. Gossip is not so easy to detect, although it will show up in remarks and whispered information as they circulate.
Bullying

This is a particularly serious trigger for conflict. It is almost always a secret activity, where one individual is subjected to pressure or threat by another. Frequently, it suppresses open disagreement or conflictual behavior because of the fear experienced by the victim. Watch out for the signs of bullying. These include sickness absence, stressful responses, or unexpected reduced performance in individuals who are normally good performers.

Secrecy

Swearing people to secrecy is one of the most corrosive behaviors in the workplace and feeds disagreement and conflict. Agreeing to keep secrets and not tell anyone is in fact collusion with this kind of behavior. Remember, when someone swears you to secrecy, they are often simply trying to protect themselves because they know that they are generating unrest or pain for someone else. The harm is increased by the agreement. It is admirable when a listener says, “If you want it kept secret, please don’t tell me, because I will not keep secrets!”

Prejudice and discrimination

They are usually the behaviors of individuals or groups, and are not departmental or culturally-based. Remember that behaving this way does not necessarily lead to open conflict, but is already a conflict in itself.

Triggers in action

The head of a marketing department was pressured by his CEO to override recruitment policy and appoint a young, inexperienced, and unqualified university graduate to the role of social media analyst. He was sworn to secrecy by the CEO. Unfortunately, the young man in question did not perform adequately and was creating a disaster. The Department Head then discovered that the young man was the boyfriend of the CEO’s daughter.

The Head of Marketing was so concerned about the situation, he realized that he could no longer keep the secret, despite the risk of exposing himself and what he had agreed to. He brought the matter to the attention of Human Resources. Investigations were started, and in time they unearthed more instances of bullying and cover ups. By not tolerating the behavior and refusing to continue with the secrecy, the Head of Department was able to improve the working life of all his staff.

DEALING WITH TRIGGER BEHAVIORS

What should you do if you notice conflict trigger behavior?

The three steps are to:

- Act quickly
- Give feedback from the position of an observer
- Tell people what you want from them

Act quickly

Act quickly to deal with behaviors that could trigger conflict. Being vigilant for these kinds of behaviors and challenging them quickly, you send clear signals that they are not acceptable and that
you are determined to prevent them. As a leader, you are a role model and are modeling the attitudes you want to promote. When team members see this, they are likely to follow your lead and exhibit the same attitudes and behaviors.

Acting quickly also saves time in the long run. After all, when people feel hurt or mistreated by colleagues, they tend to direct their energies and attention to thinking about revenge or protection, and away from the job itself. It could also nip the trigger behavior in the bud and prevent it from escalating into a full-blown problem that needs to be solved.

**Give feedback from the position of an observer**

This is a way to give feedback that negates confrontation. You position yourself beside the person and imagine you are both viewing their behavior from a distance. You and the other person then discuss the behavior of ‘that person over there.’ You can then focus on the behavior and how to correct it and not the person.

**In practice**

First, tell the other person that you want to talk about what happened, what they had intended, and to come up with ways to handle it better in future. This puts a frame around your discussion and shows them what to expect.

Position yourself beside the other person, and say you would like them to imagine you are both seeing and hearing them in some other part of the room. Ask them to recall the incident or event that led to this feedback.

Suggest they see it through as if watching it on video, and ask them to refer to themselves in the scene as ‘him’ or ‘her’ over there. Ask them if what happened was what they intended. If they had a chance to be there again, what could he or she do differently to make it okay, or to avoid what happened?

Be sure to work through all the behavior and gain their agreement to make the changes. This way of talking avoids any sense of confrontation, because the conversation is about him or her ‘over there’. It’s a dissociated point of view. As you are positioned beside them, the subtle sense is more of an alliance than a confrontation.

**Tell people what you want from them**

What you do to create a result that you do want is always different from what is done to prevent what you do not want. Letting team members know clearly what you want them to do in the future is one of the most effective, yet often most neglected, tools for effective performance.

To tell them what you want from them, gain their agreement first by saying: “I have some thoughts about what I would like from you. Can I tell you what they are?” An effective way is then to say, “What would it be like if you did this from now on? And if you did that also, what do you think would happen then?”

This way of talking invites the person to imagine possible outcomes and either accept, reject, or modify the suggestion. Whatever they propose in response is their idea. So their commitment to it will be greater than if it feels entirely as if it came from you. Remember that “What if?” and “What
“What would happen?” are powerful questions to ask when giving instructions or suggestions in any situation.

Dealing with triggers in action

One of the designers on a marketing team was furious when a colleague commented negatively about her latest photoshoot. She accused the colleague of trying to undermine her work and make her look bad in front of her peers. The manager decided to meet with the designer the next day. There was an urgent project coming up and he wanted to make sure she was able to focus on her work.

He asked the designer to visualize the confrontation again, seeing herself in the image. “Just take a look at how she reacted,” he said to the designer. “Was that the best reaction?” The designer admitted that she over-reacted. She said she was feeling tired because of deadlines, and didn’t have patience to listen to other people’s feedback. However, she could see that her colleague’s feedback was valid, even though the colleague could have been more sensitive about how he gave the feedback.

The manager stressed that he needed the designer to be able to focus on her work, and also be receptive to feedback. He would work with the team to see if the schedule could be made more manageable. And he would speak to her colleague about the importance of giving feedback in an appropriate and sensitive way.

Turning Arguments into Discussions

A conflict doesn’t always have to be a negative experience. In fact, when handled correctly, it can lead to a positive discussion. As a leader, how can you ensure this transition?

You need to:

- Listen impartially
- Reveal people’s intentions
- Temporarily put aside history

Listen impartially

Remember, when people are upset with one another, their emotions tend to rise to the surface when they are in one another’s company. As a result, they cannot hear what is said. They only perceive what they expect to hear, and miss everything else.

An effective approach to resolving differences between two people is to speak with each of them alone first. This is especially effective when their differences have become entrenched and they are unable to converse without strong feelings arising. The intention of this stage is to encourage them to talk. You want them to use up some of their emotion by ‘getting things off their chest.’ It allows you to gain a perspective on the issue from their separate points of view. And it means that each person feels that they are being listened to.

Tell both parties that the conversation is confidential, and you will not discuss it with anyone else. This encourages them to say whatever they need to say. Ask them to outline their experience of the conflict with the other person. At this point, they may ask you if you agree with them, and they may be quite insistent. You can either decline to answer, or tell them directly that this conversation is not
about making any judgments or conclusions. This shows them that you are being impartial at present. In fact, any solution that is likely to work will come from them finding agreement, and not from you choosing between them. Even if you do personally consider one more justified than the other, avoid imposing your ideas if you can. The end result will be more binding.

Reveal people’s intentions

Ask each party separately what they want to come out of resolving the argument, or what they wanted in the first place. This helps you work towards negotiating a solution. You may find they will tell you instead what they do not want, or what the other person needs to do to put things right. Try insisting gently by asking, “If that’s what you don’t want, what do you want instead?” You may even use the word ‘intention’. “What exactly is your intention?”

The value of asking this is that it helps each person to think towards what they do want, rather than away from what they do not want. By doing this, each person’s mind is focused on a solution. It is also common for both parties to want similar outcomes. Knowing this, or what the difference between them is, will help at the stage of creating agreement when you have them together in the same room.

Temporarily put aside history

Ask each person if they can imagine putting aside their history with the other person for a moment, and consider what they genuinely admire about them. The idea of imagining they can ignore their history is to clear their mind. This in turn will help them notice admirable qualities in the other person. The point of asking them what they genuinely admire about the other person is to change their focus to the positive. It also encourages them to give attention to details they could not perceive consciously in the conflict situation. So you are helping to expand their perceptions and giving them more information.

Make a list of the positive qualities. And when each person is done, ask their permission to show the list to the other person. The effect of this is to offer the other person what can seem like a gift. Every little helps when they finally come together!

It is usual to have one more brief meeting with each party to give them the lists and to ensure they are ready to meet to resolve their differences. The next step is to bring them together.

Discussions in practice

A salesperson was suspended from a busy call center as punishment for bullying a fellow worker. She was now reinstated and repentant, and was keen to make amends with the woman she had previously bullied.

However, the two women were feeling stressed at having to work again in the same team. Soon, they were constantly arguing again. The team leader had to intervene.

He met with each woman individually and listened to them impartially. He was surprised to learn that each of the women was the youngest of a family of nine children. They were also of the same age. The one who had been suspended told the team leader that, because she had eight older siblings, she had learned to be loud and pushy to be heard. The other woman told him that, in her childhood, her parents would become violent and smack hard if the children raised their voices. She had learned to be quiet and invisible to be safe. She still felt mild and timid.
The team leader felt sure he could use this information to help bring the two women together and help them resolve their differences.

**DEFUSING ANGER**

Suppose you have become aware of a conflict. You’ve met with each person individually and gained a better understanding of the situation. It’s now time to bring the two parties together!

As a leader, your aim is to defuse their feelings of anger and begin resolving the conflict. In the course of the meeting, you should:

- Ensure both parties state clearly what they need from each other
- Ensure that each listener asks questions for clarifying purposes only
- Ask the listener each time to paraphrase and confirm what they’ve just heard

**Ensure both parties state clearly what they need from each other**

When you bring them together, ensure both parties state clearly what they need from each other.

Start the meeting by explaining that you will manage the discussion. Point out that there are some rules to follow to help each person say what they need to say without interruption. At first, one person will be speaking and the other will be listening.

Explain that, as the speaker begins to speak, if the listener notices their feelings start to rise, this is what you want them to do: “Notice where you feel the feelings in your body, acknowledge them without needing to act them out, and bring your attention back to listening.”

The speaker needs to say to the listener, “This is what my experience has been like up till now, and this is what I need from you to put things right.”

The speaker should clearly state what they need from the other person. But the speaker cannot accuse, complain, or ask questions.

**Ensure that each listener asks questions for clarifying purposes only**

Ensure that each party, when they are listening, asks questions only for clarifying purposes. So, one at a time, each person tells the other what they need from that person to resolve their differences. And the listener can only ask questions to clarify what the speaker has said and what they have been asked to do. They cannot disagree, agree, apologize, explain, deny, or excuse.

The speaker continues and answers any questions the listener asks for clarification. And then the speaker indicates when they have finished.

**Ask the listener each time to paraphrase and confirm what they’ve just heard**

When the speaker finishes, explain to both parties that now it is the listener’s job to repeat back. They need to paraphrase, as accurately as possible, what they have just been told or what they have been asked to do.

The speaker’s job is to correct the listener until they are satisfied that everything they said has been accurately heard.
And it is then the other person’s turn, and the same process is repeated through to the end.

**Defusing a conflict in action**

Two bloggers disagreed with one another so much, they could not work together. They were usually kept on separate projects to help reduce the possibility of conflict. However, they were both required to work together on an urgent project. Sure enough, within a week, tensions were rising between the two. Their bitterness towards each other was beginning to sour the entire marketing team.

The team manager had gone through the preliminary process with each of them and now had invited them both to a meeting. Each blogger was allowed to speak without interruption and state what they needed from the other. During the course of the discussion, the manager discovered that both bloggers were enthusiastic gamers and they enjoyed bringing elements of gamification to their blogs. However, the two bloggers had different ideas on how best to do this. Also, the older blogger felt that he was beginning to fall behind on the latest social media marketing tools. Because of the tensions between the two bloggers, the older blogger was reluctant to ask his younger colleague for help.

The manager encouraged the bloggers to share their ideas for making compelling blogs that injected an element of fun into their calls to action. And he encouraged the older blogger to ask the younger blogger or the manager for support whenever he felt lost in the technology. And he checked that everyone understood what was agreed between them. Soon they were discussing plans for working on a new blog together.

**BUILDING AGREEMENT**

Once you’ve brought both parties together, you need to help them find common ground on which to build lasting agreement. How can you do this?

You must:

- Create and agree ground rules
- Engage in future-pacing

**Create and agree ground rules**

The purpose of creating and agreeing ground rules is to help create agreement on how both parties will behave or respond if anything like the original trigger for their conflict should arise again in the future.

You could say something like: “Let’s be honest. Despite what we’ve agreed here today, the things that used to trigger your reactions are likely to happen from time to time in the future, whether you mean them to or not. So what will you both want to do to prevent your old, knee-jerk reactions?”

Have each person write down what they will do specifically. You could also ask them to explain how they will signal to one another – like a set of simple ground rules. For example: “If you get angry and start to say that thing, I'll look at you, I'll smile and waggle my finger at you. And you'll hold your hands up and say, 'Oops, sorry, I’m doing it again!' Then things will be okay between us.”

Have both parties take a copy of the ground rules and agree to refer to it in future.
**Engage in future-pacing**

This is a process of agreeing how both parties would like to get on with one another in the future. If it is appropriate, they could even agree to differ and respect their differences.

When they imagine the future and the pressures of the workplace with its everyday stresses and strains, they may conclude that it could prove difficult at times to stick to their ground rules. So have each party consider what those risk factors or flash points could be. And have them tell one another how they would prefer to relate to one another inside and outside of such circumstances.

Having done that, the final question is, “How do they feel about things now?” Generally, both parties tend to feel they can work constructively together, and the negative feelings have been defused.

**Building agreement in action**

Remember the two bloggers we mentioned earlier? They found peace at this stage and went on to work together well in their team. In fact, the younger blogger became like a mentor for the older blogger, keeping him up to date on exciting new technologies and apps. They still argue about how best to craft an effective blog, but their conflicts now spark greater creativity between the two of them. And they know each other well enough now to recognize their triggers and handle them accordingly.
LESSON 2: CRISIS MANAGEMENT
INTRODUCING CRISIS MANAGEMENT

What is crisis management?

You can think of crisis management as a set of strategies and processes for dealing with unexpected negative situations. In such situations, the brand’s reputation is at risk, first from the crisis itself, and then from how you handle the crisis. In the short term, you need to determine how urgent the crisis is. Then your focus moves to solving the immediate problem. In the long term, you need to deploy a strategic process of repairing brand reputation and rebuilding consumer trust.

No matter how many safeguards and processes you put in place, you could suddenly find yourself facing an unexpected crisis. Any business can become engulfed in bad publicity when a crisis hits. In today’s social media environment, news travels fast, and you have to respond promptly and proactively. Even if you don’t have a social media presence, your business is likely to have other digital assets today, such as a website and online shop, or digital PR.

Sources of crisis

But where might crisis come from? Unfortunately, they can originate from a number of sources, and by their very nature are totally unpredictable. There are some common categories of incident that you need to be prepared for.

Natural disasters

The first, and perhaps most well-known type of crisis stems from natural disasters. These include earthquakes, storms, tsunamis, and so on. Also, be mindful of social and political shocks, such as war, terrorism, coups, or violent protests.

Cyber-attacks

Obviously, digital assets are vulnerable to cyber-attacks. Many companies have been hit by distributed denial of service, of DDoS, attacks. Cyber-attacks can also lead to breaches or leaks of users’ personal data. Such leaks can severely erode customer trust in a company.

Mis-deeds

A company that is exposed for conducting misdeeds, such as criminal or moral transgressions, is going to face a serious crisis. For example, the company might have defied regulation, or worse acted in a clearly unethical way. Customers are unlikely to want to buy products from a company that has been found guilty of illegal activity.

Financial crimes

Financial crimes are a particular category of misdeeds. These relate to a company’s financial matters, and often their tax affairs. This can be a PR disaster for a company, because its financial management might be clearly seen to be at odds with the values that the company proudly promotes in its marketing literature. Most customers regard it as unethical for companies to avoid paying their fair share of taxes, especially if the company’s senior executives are being well compensated with large salaries and generous bonuses.
Supply chain failure

A failure in your supply chain can lead to stock shortages and empty shelves. Initially, you might be able to spin this as evidence of booming demand for your products. However, if the problem persists, it will be seen simply as a symptom of poor planning and bad infrastructure.

Safety scare

One crisis that all companies fear is a high-profile product recall or safety scare. People quickly lose confidence in a company if its products are found to be defective. This can present a major brand risk.

Let’s consider a famous example. Remember when Johnson & Johnson had to recall Tylenol back in 1982? This was its branded paracetamol (called acetaminophen in the US) product. The company moved fast to address the crisis. It took a huge commercial hit in the short term, in order to earn consumer trust back in the long term.

Staff issues

Don’t forget about staff crises too. Strikes and layoffs lead to bad optics for a company. They create the impression of an ailing company that has lost the loyalty of its workforce. If these employees then go online to vent their frustrations, this can become a brand’s worst nightmare.

Because of the changing musical landscape in the new millennium, in 2013 British music and entertainment retailer HMV laid off many of its staff. Employees were given little warning of this move. Staff took over the brand’s main Twitter account to provide a running commentary in a deeply bitter tone. Instead of trying to control the message and reassert its brand image, the company simply deleted the tweets and failed to fully address the reasons for the redundancy. This made a bad crisis even worse.

Disclosures

A more recent type of crisis that companies have faced centers on the issue of disclosures. This is particularly important in the realm of influencer marketing. In some cases, influencers or brand ambassadors have not been sufficiently clear about the fact that they are taking part in marketing when they are promoting a particular brand. This can damage a brand and put its dishonesty on public display.

PREPARING FOR A CRISIS

Being able to respond effectively to a crisis is very important. However, it’s even more important to be prepared for a crisis. In fact, this is a crucial part of the crisis management process. The better your preparation, the better you’ll be able to respond when a crisis actually happens.

What is a crisis?

But what is a crisis actually? Before you can plan for one, you need to have a clear definition of what constitutes a crisis. Not every customer complaint is a crisis, after all. You need to be able to
distinguish between a Twitter rant and a genuine risk to your brand reputation. And think about different levels of crisis. Categorize crises based on conceivable or likely worst-case scenarios.

Every business and industry faces different crises. Pharmaceutical companies worry about different risks than, say, video games publishers do. But both have a good idea of what the worst ones could be. And they should be able to plot out what they would do in the event of each.

**Policies and procedures**

To execute effective crisis management, a company must have a number of procedures and policies already in place. Then people will know how to act in a crisis situation.

**Social medial policy**

Because of social media, a brand crisis can quickly spiral out of control. So it’s crucial that a company has a detailed social media policy. Remember, as in the case of HMV, some crises start with an employee’s misuse of the company’s social media accounts. This can be accidental, such as inadvertently posting the wrong information on a social media account. Or it could be malicious, where employees use social media platforms to air their grievances. So you can see why it’s important to have a robust policy which defines who has access to social media accounts, at what level, and exactly how the company uses social media. These guidelines will make a social media crisis less likely.

Such a policy should first of all define copyright guidelines. Companies can find themselves in trouble if they share copyright material without proper permission or source recognition. Pay particular attention to copyright of photos and images. Your company should define how it uses and curates other people’s content.

The social media policy should also outline privacy guidelines. Employees need to know how to interact with customers and discuss their personal data. And then need to know when it’s more appropriate to take conversations offline to a private space.

**Confidentiality guidelines**

Make sure your employees are also aware of the company’s confidentiality guidelines. They must understand what company information is for public consumption and what must be kept confidential. The leaking of confidential information or trade secret can lead to a serious crisis for a company.

**Brand guidelines**

It’s very important for your company to have brand tone of voice guidelines. These outline how the brand ‘speaks’ to its customers. What language should you use? Is the tone formal or casual? How should you talk about specific products and brand terms? Aim to cover all aspects of customer interaction. For example, how should staff address customers? How should they sign off communications? What information do they need to include in email subject lines and footers? Staff also need to be guided on how to deal with praise, complaints, and questions from customers. This should go right down to the detailed level of the exact structure of a response message.

**Crisis response plan**
Although you may have many detailed documents and guidelines, it’s important to also have a simple crisis response plan. It’s a one-page document defining the main broad categories of incident and personnel to be notified in the event of each, with full contact details. It also outlines initial response guidelines, if any.

**Information storage guidelines**

All of this information must be readily accessible by anyone who is in a capacity to act in any way. A shared drive, Dropbox folder or other cloud location makes sense for this. It's crucial that staff are aware of the general principles, but also have access to the detail anytime, anywhere. People will not be able to remember every detail, but they need to know where they should go to get those details.

**Access guidelines**

Finally, let's return to social media issues again. It's crucial that admin access to social media accounts is limited to as few people as possible. And admins should be able to grant or revoke access to anyone at a moment's notice. Passwords to these admin accounts or third-party management tools should be very complex and secure. This reduces the risk of unauthorized access to the accounts. These can be generated randomly using a password tool such as random.org. Or you could use Google Chrome’s suggested password feature.

**DETECTION AND SHORT-TERM CRISIS HANDLING**

**Role of social media**

Social media has changed the business landscape. It enables us to get our brand message out in the world in timely and innovative ways. However, social media also brings some risks. Negative publicity in a small corner of social media can quickly erupt into a brand crisis.

**Social media monitoring**

To stay on top of this, you need to engage in social media monitoring. This ensures you get timely alerts around brand issues. The sooner you are aware of an issue, the more proactively you can respond.

So what exactly is social monitoring? It’s an ongoing system of searches, alerts, and responses to social media mentions of your brand, products, competitors or industry topics. After all, if someone is talking about your products on Twitter, you want to know about it! You can conduct social monitoring using one of the many listening and monitoring tools. These include Brandwatch, Sprout Social, Talkwalker, Socialbakers, Sysomos and the like. But you don’t have to rely on expensive enterprise solutions. You can also use the built-in notification features on the social platforms themselves and wider web alerts through Google Alerts.

**Social media alerts**

Ultimately your goal is to be among the first people to find out when content or conversations involving your brand are being shared online. This gives you a head start on responding to negative backlash. Indeed, it might even be your first indication that something is wrong with one of your products or that there has been a major brand incident.
You should set up these alerts to notify a very specific group of people. This will help ensure that the brand is ready for any incident that may occur. When it does, you need to follow the three A’s. This is a three-step approach: acknowledge, apologize, and address.

Acknowledgment

Your very first step as a brand in crisis is simply to acknowledge the issue. This starts internally. When a brand crisis blows up, many people’s natural reaction will be to go into a state of denial. You might even instinctively want to shut down conversations, hiding any issues from the wider world.

But hiding from the crisis doesn’t make it go away! These things happen to every company. Indeed, they have happened to some of the world’s most loved brands. And here’s the good news. When handled correctly, a crisis can prove to be a milestone in the brand’s story.

So first, the company needs to acknowledge the crisis internally. Everyone agrees that there’s a genuine crisis that must be tackled head on. Then there must be some sort of external acknowledgement. This shows the world you’re taking the crisis seriously and proactively working to resolve it. These days, this will likely take the form of a tweet. However, if more detailed information is needed, you could make a press release and blog post.

Apology

If there are any aggrieved parties with a legitimate case for their grievance against the company, these people must be shown empathy and sincerity. Don’t make a half-hearted or equivocal apology. It needs to be an authentic and human-led apology. If you use corporate speak and mitigating language, customers will think that you’re just going through the motions. It will seem like you haven’t fully acknowledged the issue yourself. Don’t hide behind prepared statements. Lead with a human voice. If possible, do so with a video of someone senior within the company offering a heartfelt apology.

Address

Your apology will sound hollow if you don’t show that you’re taking concrete steps to address the issue. Remember, whatever the cause of the crisis, an apology alone will never be enough. Customers and the wider public will want to know how you aim to resolve the issue. And they want assurance that a similar crisis will be avoided in the future. Here again, your message should be conveyed in detail with a human voice. Vague, corporate speak as written by a legal team is not enough for today’s customers.

Any crisis is unpleasant and can tie up resources as you strive to deal with it. But remember, a crisis is also an opportunity for a marketing and PR team to shine in the face of adversity. This is a chance to put on public display the core ethos of the company. You get to show the world what you think about your customers and how they should be treated. This lets people know how seriously you take what you do and your rock-solid commitment to putting things right when they go wrong.

REPAIRING THE DAMAGE AND REBUILDING TRUST

Rebuilding trust

So your company has survived the crisis. The dust has settled and sales are starting to pick up again. Everyone can breathe sigh of relief, right? Well, yes, up to a point. But this is no time for self-
Congratulations and complacency. Now the hard work begins as you start to rebuild consumer trust over time, in the wake of a crisis.

Once the initial response has been made, it’s time to form a more detailed and measured response to the public. Create a crisis overview to give an outline of what happened on which to base this response.

**Key questions**

The crisis overview needs to answer a number of key questions.

**What happened?**

Present the facts of the situation, fully and truthfully. Don’t try to equivocate and deflect blame. Outline exactly what the crisis involved.

**Why did the crisis happen?**

Here again, you need to avoid the blame game and instead present the root causes of the crisis. Any attempt to blame the crisis solely on external sources will not sit well with customers. They will suspect the company is trying to hide something.

**Where did it happen?**

This will give customers a good sense of the scale of the problem, and whether it affects them.

**Who was involved?**

You also need to make clear who was involved. Was it human error, or a systemic failure? Was it caused by criminals intent on damaging the company, or employees with a grudge?

**How was alerted?**

Customers also want assurance that you have crisis management plans in place. So when this crisis broke, who was alerted and how? Were external organizations or law enforcement involved? Did you have to contact emergency services?

**What have you learned?**

Now come arguably two of the most important questions you need to address. How will the current situation be dealt with? And what steps will you be taking to prevent future issues? People need to know that you have learned from the crisis and are being proactive to prevent a recurrence.

**Publishing the crisis overview**

In a crisis overview, you aim to address the most likely questions that people have about the crisis. However, you can’t anticipate every possible question or concern. So, in the crisis overview, make sure you provide contact information for people with further questions.

Your crisis overview can then be published as a press release to follow up on your initial response to the situation.
At this stage, there may still be a lot of detractors online. A careful balancing is required now. Of course, it’s best to be proactive and face the issues head on. However, you also need to make sure that the discussion doesn’t descend into unproductive arguments with angry consumers. Unfortunately, some people are never satisfied! And once they have your attention, they are reluctant to let you go. So engage with them as far as you productively can. State your case, and proactively offer information in a transparent and authentic way. And then move on.

Rebuilding trust in practice

Let’s consider another example from Johnson & Johnson. In 2018, the company faced allegations that there was asbestos in its talcum powder. The company addressed the concerns raised by creating a ‘Facts About Talc’ microsite, which tackled the allegations head on.

An informational website like this can provide an all-in-one place for people to inform themselves over concerns. Your company can then link to this site in social media conversations. You can also ensure that it appears in search results. After all, search and social media are the two key channels that people will use to find out more about a product issue like this. You want to make your own site the endpoint of as many consumer queries as possible. This enables you to control the message. Also, it helps to settle the matter in the mind of the consumers. And it underlines the brand’s commitment to the customer’s safety first and foremost.