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Derailed: Communicating Singapore's mass transit crises [Case study]

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Derailed: Communicating Singapore's mass transit crises

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The case: In December 2011, one of Singapore's main mass transit rail lines came to a standstill for several hours on two separate days. While occasional public transport breakdowns are unavoidable, the rail operator came under intense criticism for its poor handling of the incidents, including its failure in crisis communication.

Its value: This case can be used to illustrate a number of perspectives and concepts from the literature on crisis and organisational communication. Of particular contemporary interest is what the case shows about how communication technologies, including social media, should and should not be used by organisations.

With Christmas and year-end festivities around the corner, commuters jostling to get into the trains during the evening peak hours on the Singapore subway looked hurried, though not particularly harried. The heavier than usual crowds were to be expected at this time of year. However, what turned the mood sour was the breakdowns that began to occur and, like falling cards, eventually paralysed the entire North-South line. The heavily used metro line connects Singapore's downtown to several heavily populated suburban areas. The unprecedented episode would go down as the most serious train breakdown in the 24-year history of SMRT, Singapore's metro network operator (Lim, 2012).

The first disruption, on 15 December 2011, lasted five hours while the second, on 17 December, lasted seven hours. With more than 220,000 commuters affected (Tan, 2012a), confusion reigned. Trains were stalled in underground tunnels and some commuters had to be guided onto the tracks to walk in the dark along the tunnel before they could emerge at the stations (Almenoar & Sim, 2012a). When the doors of some trains did not open, and ventilation wore thin, train windows were smashed to let air in (Li, 2012). There was no respite for those who managed to make their way to the stations. There, they were faced with customer service officers who had received no formal training to deal with such incidents. Additional manpower was short and late in deploying (Almenoar & Sim, 2012b). When commuters exited the stations to continue their journeys, they were faced with another set of disappointments. Bus-bridging services to ferry them onward came only hours later (Almenoar & Sim, 2012c).

Over the coming days, commuters seethed with anger. They lambasted the SMRT publicly, online—through blogs, chat forums, social-networking sites and e-mail—and offline. Some

SMRT staff reportedly received "some nasty remarks and scolding" from commuters (Almenoar & Sim, 2011a). One commuter captured up general sentiment: "I don't think their [SMRT's] best is good enough yet" (Hong, 2012, p. A8). The Singapore government acted swiftly. Within days, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the commission of a Committee of Inquiry (COI) to get to the root of the problem.

Weeks after the incidents, Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew declared during a parliamentary sitting that the crises "exposed gaps in emergency preparedness and crisis response, and we need to do better" (Lim, 2012, p. A10). The lack of crisis preparedness—it was to emerge later during the COI—came in several forms. First, train drivers said they had not been trained for emergency situations. So when trains stalled in the tunnel, it did not occur to them to turn on the ventilation switch to ensure air circulation (Almenoar, 2012). Second, even though SMRT did have a rail incident management plan, it was "too complicated", declared an expert witness. The witness observed that the senior management lacked formal operational training and its "competency regime … deals only with theoretical training qualifications" (Tan, 2012a). The plan was also activated too late.

Third, blame was directed at SMRT chief executive Saw Phaik Hwa, who resigned from SMRT shortly after the crises (Chang, 2012). She was accused of focusing on generating profits for her shareholders by converting open spaces into rentable retail space (Goh, 2012), doubling SMRT's profits in the nine years she helmed it, instead of ensuring that the trains were well maintained for her main stakeholders, the commuters (Tan, 2012c). It emerged that under her watch, SMRT's maintenance budget had not increased since 2002 despite increasing ridership, more frequent train runs and ageing structures (Tan, 2012b).

Fourth, even though SMRT apologised after the first crisis, its communication left much to be desired. When the first hint of a train breakdown occurred on 15 December, a message was sent to their co-workers—the taxi drivers—presumably to take advantage of the breakdown. The message, which was flashed on SMRT taxi drivers' screens, read: "Income opportunity. Dear partners, there is a breakdown in our MRT train services from Bishan MRT to Marina Bay MRT stretch of stations." A taxi passenger took a photo of the screen and posted it online. It went viral instantly and the message drew heavy criticisms for its insensitivity. SMRT apologised and explained that a wrong message template was used (Soh & Tan, 2011). Commuters also accused SMRT staff of not being able to communicate well over the public address system of the trains. An announcement like this was heard: "Due to a slight delay, there will be delay" ("The great SMRT cockup of 2011", 2011). Communication updates from the corporate communication could also have been more prompt using social media. SMRT's official twitter, @SMRT_Singapore, used to have this as description, "This is the official Twitter channel of SMRT. We're here, 9am–6pm, Mon-Fri (excl public holidays)". Lim (2011) argued that SMRT had since realised that social media does not have 'official hours' and has changed its twitter description.

The COI met in April 2012. It heard from a diverse range of people, from the embattled former CEO to staff manning stations and engineers. By July 2012, they concluded their six-week investigation and released a 358-page report. Among the key findings were that "a defective metal fastener in an assembly that held up a power-supplying rail had triggered the first breakdown on Dec 15" ("What it's all about", 2012). The subsequent damage to trains went undetected and that led to the second breakdown on 17 December. More importantly, SMRT's maintenance lapses and incident management were found wanting. SMRT promised to shift its focus back to an "engineering-focused organisation" (Tan, 2012c, p. D2). The Singapore government said it shared the blame in the breakdowns (Tan, 2012d). As the regulator, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) must have held the SMRT accountable and it fell short.

Lessons for crisis communication

This case presents several streams of research and teaching moments within the field of crisis communication. Some suggestions are offered here.

First, the case can be seen from the 'anticipatory perspective', i.e. how crisis planning can be further institutionalised as a critical function in organisations. Organisations often pay lip service to the need for crisis planning. Possessing a crisis plan is often used as an indicator of crisis preparedness (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006). More than that, how the conceptualisation of the plan can trigger drills to test out its rigor (Pang, Cropp & Cameron, 2006). Low, Chung and Pang (2012) argued that strong leadership and a healthy communication culture could enhance the institutionalisation of crisis plans. This stream of work is what Olaniran and Williams (2012) described as anticipatory perspective, how organisations anticipate and pre-plan for crises before they occur.

Second, there is the management perspective, i.e. how the management could have been more proactive in addressing the myriad of issues the organisation faced. In one of his first comments, the CEO who succeeded Saw admitted there were "deep-seated issues" within SMRT's management. "There are clearly managerial, structural, cultural and systemic issues that need addressing … And that is one of my top priorities," he said (Tan, 2012e). The question remains: What does it take for organisational leaders to begin to address these deep-seated issues while at the same time ensuring normal functioning of the systems? One perspective offered by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009) is to foster adaptation, enabling employees to adapt to new levels of excellence even as they maintain current best practices. Corollary to that is getting employees to lead instead of a mere top-down approach. Tichy and Bennis (2007) argued that it boiled down to making the judgment call. "Good leaders make a habit of sensing, framing, and aligning so that they are prepared for the call, which can arise any moment" (p. 99)

Third, we can apply the communication perspective, i.e. how messages can be tailored to distressed commuters. Jin, Pang and Cameron (2010) called for more sensitivity in addressing stakeholders' emotions in times of crises. They identified critical stakeholders as primary publics who share three key characteristics:

- They are most affected by the crisis.
- They share common interests, and destiny, in seeing the crisis resolved.
- They have long-term interests, and influences, on the organisation's reputation and operation.

Often, organisations often assume stakeholders to react rationally (Pang, Kim & Chaidaroon, in press). However, crises often bring out human irrationalities and emotions. Understanding the emotional upheavals stakeholders face in a crisis can help organisations design appropriate strategies to address stakeholder needs. The sooner organisations accept that, the more agile they will be in responding to stakeholders, who now have an armoury of social media platforms to vent their complaints and observations. When organisations are slow in responding, stakeholder emotions dominate the information vacuum and cast the organisation in bad light (Pang, in press).

Jin, Pang and Cameron's Integrated Crisis Mapping model (ICM) provides a framework to understand emotions. For transport failures, they found that stakeholders would experience anxiety, sadness and anger. They will engage in conative coping, seeking solutions to their problems instead of feeling helpless (Jin, Pang & Cameron, 2012). Given this perspective, organisations like SMRT facing such a crisis should tailor their messages to address the emotions experienced, and provide concrete measures for stakeholders to follow. ●

Questions for discussion

1. What further crisis communication research can be stimulated by the SMRT crisis?
2. How can organisations leverage on the use of social media to communicate during crises?
3. How can organisations improve their systems after a major crisis like the one SMRT had?

4. How can post-mortems be translated into organisational learning so that future errors can be prepared for and prevented?
5. How can organisations embark on the process of renewal after a major crisis in order for transformation to take root?

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