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Trade Unions should R.A.C.E. to survive in the current communications climate

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ABSTRACT

This commentary examines the impact of social media campaigning on crisis communications in the labour movement. Labour crises usually take the form of strikes. This commentary examines upon two cases: (i) McMaster University vs. Service Employees International Union; and (ii) Brazilian Vale vs. United Steel Workers of America Local 6500. Being unable to effectively communicate with various publics represents a large problem for union survival. This commentary proposes that executing effective strategic communications will enable trade unions to better create a dialogue between the leadership and all stakeholders while creating and maintaining relationships with members, the media, and communities.

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In a time where those who control the flow of information hold extraordinary and growing power, an organization must engage in effective crisis communication practices. Yes, there are costs associated with engaging in effective communications management, but it is far more costly to have others speak about you or be completely missing from thought and conversation. Though many organizations are beginning to adapt to this reality, there is one group that is having a very difficult time adjusting to the digital and information age – Canadian trade unions.

Trade unions in Canada are in tumultuous times. Although the reason for this can be attributed to a multitude of factors such as the declining economy, the changing nature of work and the challenges posed by globalization, among many others, one fact remains: trade unions are losing the battle in the court of public opinion; an approval rate at an all-time low – 52% (Jones, 2011)– demon-

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strating this fact.

Being unable to effectively communicate with various publics represents a large problem for union survival. However, executing effective strategic communications will enable trade unions to better create a dialogue between the leadership and all stakeholders while creating and maintaining relationships with members, the media, and communities.

In an extensive research project conducted at McMaster University (Courchesne, 2012), it was suggested that trade unions can improve their communications management efforts by increasing resources toward communication programs at the local level and putting greater emphasis on utilizing the RACE model of communications – Research, Analyze, Communicate, and Evaluate. The RACE model (Marston, 1963) has been proven to be a valid and valuable framework through which organizations can begin to create effective communication programs; citing a multiple authors who describe strategic communications processes identical to the RACE model (Kelly, 2001; Austin & Pinkleton, 2001; Hearle, 1993; Regester & Larkin, 2005; Paul, 2011). The two following case studies will demonstrate the vast difference in the utilization of effective crisis communications and public relations. The first case study, which demonstrates a “best practice” example of crisis communications and public relations, will be of the Service Employees’ International Union (SEIU) Local 2 in Hamilton, Ontario. The second case study, demonstrating a “lesser practice” example of crisis communications and public relations will be of the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) Local 6500 in Sudbury, Ontario.

Case Study #1: McMaster University vs. Service Employees’ International Union Local 2

Though no full case study determining the reputation of the union after a strike action has been developed, first-hand accounts as well as information of the communicative activities were gathered through a personal interview with Diego Mendez, the communications representative for the union local. The strike began on January 7th, 2011 and ended in just over a week (January 16th, 2011) (McMaster Daily News, 2011). This can, in part, be attributed to a communications strategy that was based on research, analysis, and the utilization of effective communication channels.

The messages that were put forth brought both the Hamilton and McMaster University communities together in solidarity with SEIU Local 2. As

Diego Mendez stated,

The community was active with communications during strike time. It was, in part, due to making the issue broader so that it could resonate with more than only the members – the communications brought up issues that affected the surrounding issues and that were in the public interest (Mendez, 2011).

The key issues were fair wages and keeping good jobs in Hamilton, both particularly resonant with the Hamilton public after so many job losses in manufacturing over the last few decades.

This case suggests how beneficial it is to follow the first two steps (research and analyze) in the RACE model of communications to the overall effectiveness of message construction. The communication strategy was also on message with the overall organizational vision of SEIU Local 2. This may be attributed to the fact that, unlike USWA Local 6500, SEIU Local 2 has a vision statement that the unit could draw from to remain in line with its organizational goals. The greater vision called upon within the campaign development existed within their charter:

We stand for progressive politics, with one foot planted firmly in the present struggle of our members, and the other planted in the future making the world a better place for our children and grandchildren (SEIU, 2005, p. 3).

This messaging was carefully crafted, as research on the issues, the area, and the audience, and organizational mission was conducted prior to the strike (Mendez, 2011). The messaging was derived from substantive research and analysis – focused on the local culture, politics and concerns – was used to determine the most effective and resonant messages, the third step in the RACE model of communications. A continual on-the-spot evaluation of communications through reporting of frontline strikers, conversations that the communications team had with stakeholders and interviews with students led to an evolving determination of what was working during the campaign-- leading to a big win for SEIU Local 2 and the workers they represented.

Case Study #2: Brazilian Vale vs. United Steel Workers of America Local 6500

A case study performed by Kim Morris (2010), focuses on the strike action of USWA 6500 members working at Brazilian mining company Vale operating within Sudbury. The strike started July 13, 2009 and lasted a painstaking 360 days – ending July 8, 2010. Though the report discusses both the reputational impact on Vale as well as USWA 6500, the focus will be upon Local 6500.

Although one can only speculate about the motivations behind communicative actions of Local 6500, it appears that the communication strategy was flawed from the start. Not only did the local union leadership manage to alienate the surrounding community, but they also managed to alienate their grassroots support: their workers. The local involved within the strike did not have the support of key stakeholders, something the USWA 6500 would have been able to identify if the research phase within the strategic communications process had been followed.

An audit determining the perception of the trade union in the community must not have been performed. This would have formed a strong base for their future communications; shaping their goals, objectives, specific messages, and channels of communication. As Morris (2010) states,

In 2008, this was the reality: Vale employees boasting of salaries exceeding \$150,000 a year due in part to overtime and generous nickel bonuses. Support in 2009-2010 was not always there because others perceived that Vale workers had flaunted these wages in the face of workers in other sectors who did not make anywhere close to comparable amounts (p. 12).

Communications could have been created in a way that resonated with workers; in a way that brought solidarity to an otherwise fragmented workforce in Sudbury. The issue at heart was not only about wages but it was a matter of principles. Instead of fostering positive relationships with the community with directed communicative efforts:

USWA Local 6500 made racist statements, discarded court decisions regarding picket line protocols, encouraged violence against so-called scabs by posting their photos and addresses on public websites, and threatened civil disobedience if Vale persisted with its plans to re-start operations (Morris, 2010, p. 17).

The union damaged their reputation with threatening messages and scare tactics. Even though, as Morris (2010) points out, “Sudbury has been a union town” (p. 18), the activities of USWA Local 6500 were harmful to the reputational capital of the union and shattered the reputation of the union among a union town” (p. 18), the activities of USWA Local 6500 were harmful to the reputational capital of the union and shattered the reputation of the union among residents. This demonstrated a wilful blindness to the local culture and mores that could have been averted had evidence been gathered and analysed before communicative action was taken.

Conclusion

These case studies, although brief, offer insight into just how useful the RACE model can be to organizations during the creation of a crisis communication strategy. However, there are limitations to the research. Firstly, the case studies are based on anecdotal accounts of the events. Though there is documented evidence of specific actions, including time lines and specific communications materials, there are details which will always be left to speculation, for lack of evidence and data. Moreover, the case studies identified occur in two separate industries, in different areas, with different unions, and with different lengths. Notwithstanding these limitations, it is proposed that these case studies are shedding light on how differing approaches to communications management during a crisis can yield significantly different effects.

It is important for organizations to understand that although it may be costly to invest in personnel or allocating more funds to a communications program, it pays off for organizations. Being able to own the communication climate – especially during crisis – is well worth the investment.

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