

Case 9-6 The West Virginia Mine Disaster: An Emotional Roller Coaster and Public Relations Train Wreck

In the wee hours of a cold January morning, an underground explosion in the Sago mine in West Virginia left the fate of 13 miners in serious jeopardy. Although rescue efforts began immediately, it was 22 hours later before a fresh-air tunnel could be drilled into the mine shaft and workers could make their way to the trapped miners. There were no signs of life, even though the miners were veterans and each had been issued survival equipment. Monday, January 2, 2006, was a long day for family and friends.

Late the next day, rescue workers were able to penetrate deeply enough into the mine to reach an area near where the trapped miners were thought to be. Initial reports were that one miner's body was found, then, around midnight, reports that the other 12 miners were alive began circulating among friends and family gathered at the site. Joyous pandemonium erupted. Families hugged and danced. The governor of West Virginia, Joe Manchin, made an "official announcement" of the good news.

All across America, morning newspapers went to press carrying the banner headline "They're Alive!"

But, they weren't.

Miscommunication Causes Second Catastrophe

Through some dreadful miscommunication, the message was reversed. One miner, Randal McCloy, Jr., was alive. The other 12 were dead. It was West Virginia's worst mining accident in 28 years.

So early Wednesday morning, Ben Hatfield, president and CEO of International Coal Group (ICG), which operated the mine, told the families that the news—now about three hours old—was wrong and that their loved ones were not coming out alive. About 45 minutes later Hatfield made a general announcement that the initial reports were wrong and that the news was bad, not good.

Many Americans awoke on Wednesday to read the "good news" in their morning papers. Like the families, they later learned the truth. The broadcast media and online news services, of course, were able to more easily correct the misinformation. But nearly everyone was asking: How could this have happened? Why was everyone misinformed?

The answer is probably never going to be known for sure, but among the contributing factors would be:

- Rescue workers were wearing full-face oxygen masks, making clear communication difficult.
- The rescue crews were exhausted.
- Communication was taking place in code.
- Poor connections and conditions made static-free transmissions impossible.
- The command center lines were "open," which meant that anyone standing near could hear (misunderstand?) the communication between rescue workers and those at the base.

It is important to note that Hatfield and ICG didn't make an official announcement about the miners' safety. Governor Manchin

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FIGURE 9-5 West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin addresses the media

Source: (Courtesy of Steven Wayne Rotsch.)

was apparently repeating what he heard at the scene, and even ICG officials were deceived for a while by the unconfirmed reports. Of course, everyone wanted to believe.

The misinformation likely came from well-intentioned bystanders who thought they heard good news. Cell phones were prominent among those present, making it easy to spread what was thought to be good news.

The Company Takes Extreme Criticism for Poor Communication

With the truth came a firestorm of emotional criticism, much of it directed to Hatfield and ICG. Family members believed the initial reports came from ICG. “He strictly told us they was alive,” said one relative. “Three hours later, he comes back and said they was dead.” Others promised to sue. Just who and on what grounds wasn’t clear, but the emotions were raw. Police stood by to restore order if necessary.

Once the truth was known, Hatfield and ICG followed textbook procedures in communicating the hard facts. “We prayed for miracles,” he said. “Despite our grief and despair at the loss of our 12 co-workers, we want to celebrate the one miracle that was delivered.” People in the crowd screamed, “He lied to us.”

Hatfield would later say that he deeply regretted “allowing the jubilation to go on longer than it should have.” He understood the people, even those who were critical of him. “They certainly have some basis for their frustration, having been put through this emotional roller coaster. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I regret that it happened. I would do anything if it had not happened.”

Those thoughts were small consolation to a nation seeking answers. One online poll taken on Wednesday, January 4, showed 61 percent of the respondents felt ICG had done a poor job of communicating. Another 20 percent thought the company was right in withholding any news until all the facts were in, and 19 percent just didn’t know.

As might be expected, law firms in Charleston, Morgantown, Bluefield, and other West Virginia cities cranked up the advertising, one claiming to be specialists in “West Virginia Coal Mine Accident” lawsuits.

Seeking to Lay Blame, All Became a Target

In the aftermath, one Democratic blog suggested President George W. Bush was to blame for the accident because “he didn’t do anything to prevent the accident” (MyDD.com). The AFL-CIO accused Congress of doing too little, too late to improve mine safety. There was plenty of blame to go around.

Mine officials and politicians were not the only ones on the hot seat. Media critics were quick to point out that reporters, editors, and correspondents passed along the unfounded information, often without attribution. Others could see how the problem evolved. Alex Jones of the Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy speaking the day after on PBS observed:

This is a huge public interest story, the kind of story that grips a country like ours. Everybody was watching it. The news media were there; of course the families were gathered there.

And a miscommunication happens when someone overheard or misoverheard a statement that they had found the miners, interpreted that to mean that they were alive, and started cell phone calls to family members, giving them the idea that their loved ones had been saved.

The bells started ringing, the governor spoke; everyone was clamoring. And it was very, very clear that something wonderful had happened, except it didn’t happen to be true.

This was not, of course, an official piece of information. But it’s very hard for me fault the press in reporting that the families were saying they had gotten word that this had happened because that was literally the truth.

Rachel Smolkin, managing editor of the *American Journalism Review*, offers other considerations:

Well, a lot of it is deadline-driven. And this is a story that happened right on deadline for many papers, particularly papers on the East Coast. Then you have your deadline looming, you’re hearing news that appears to be wonderful news, certainly news you want to get out to your readers; this is a miraculous ending to what seemed like it could be a very sad story, that these miners had been found.

I think the problem, if there is one, what the media maybe can be faulted for to some degree is not being a little more careful with their qualifiers. You have to be very careful about attributing information.

Dave Byron, APR, Volusia County, Florida, Community Information Director, puts the controversy into perspective for public relations practitioners:

The coal mine tragedy in West Virginia brings to light some immediate public information lessons that we need to remember:

- It is absolutely essential only factual, confirmed information be released. This especially is true when it comes to injuries and fatalities and the numbers of them.
- We must always remember the impact information has (good or bad) on family members and others close to a situation.
- We again learn the lesson that affected family members want to be given straightforward, unfiltered information as quickly as possible, again either good or bad news. They do not want their emotions to be toyed with.
- We learn that a Governor’s Office may or may not have all the straight information. Local public information officers (or corporate spokespersons) must take control and rise and fall with their own abilities. We cannot rely on outside agencies.
- We learn . . . that being defensive about a bad situation only creates the perception of there’s something to hide.

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- We again confirm the fact that speaking with one voice during a tragedy is essential.
- We also learn that if we are an agency with inspection/oversight responsibility, we will be held accountable if we do not follow through with corrective action before a tragedy occurs. Burying the head in the sand hardly ever brings good.
- We also learn that once a tragedy occurs, we cannot knee jerk react from emotion. Investigation will take months. It's important to allow the authorities/agencies the time it takes to get to the bottom of the cause/solution, etc.

In the beginning, everyone feared the worst. Mine accidents, many times, have no happy endings.

In the end, everyone's fears were realized. That one escaped was a miracle.

The victims even understood their plight. Some used their dying moments to pen letters to their families.

It is the middle that is troublesome. There should have never been a middle. The concept of "One Clear Voice" has never been more important.

Better communication systems, better communication techniques, better control of the communication command base would have eliminated the false hope that miscommunication brought. This is a lesson for all practitioners. Be prepared. Once disaster strikes, it's too late to write a crisis plan or develop a legacy of trust. ■

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What preparations might ICG have made to (a) anticipate the incident at the Sago mine and (b) avert the communication fiasco? Is it possible to "expect the unexpected"?
2. Did you detect a public relations presence during this case? Explain.
3. What role did the governor's pronouncement play in the scenario? Was this a good idea? Why or why not?

PROBLEM 9-A WHEN ASSOCIATES DISAGREE IN HANDLING AN EMERGENCY

Three months ago, you were hired to start a public relations department at Reliable Steel Products Company. This is a young company with big ambitions. It is located in a medium-sized city in an area where industrial and residential building are predicted to boom. Reliable manufactures pipes, beams, rods, and other heavy parts for just about any kind of building.

After 3 months, your "department" consists of you and a secretary. Your outlook is bright, however. You report directly to the president, and she wants to be publicly known and highly regarded in the community and in the industry. To be of maximum help, you have done your homework by checking on the reputation of Reliable around town and in the industry. In the home community, Reliable and its president are not universally known, but employees, neighbors, and the people at the Chamber of Commerce feel that Reliable is well-managed, makes good products, and is a civic-minded neighbor. A few people did say that there have been a few accidents involving employees; it seems a rather dangerous place to work.

One morning, when the president is on her way to the state capital, you get a call from a reporter at the local daily newspaper. He says that an ambulance driver told