Toxicity: University of Maryland, and a Case Study in Compounding Crisis Events

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In sport, managers are often tasked with responding to organizational crises under unique public scrutiny (Kellison, 2013; Pielke, 2013), while navigating diverse stakeholder interests (Yiamouyiannis, Lawrence, Hums, & Ridpath, 2010). Importantly, an organization’s crisis response presents an opportunity to demonstrate the ethical leadership of key managers and communicate organizational values (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Yet, an organizational response devoid of ethical underpinnings risks compounding the damage of the initial crisis event (Kellison, Bass, Lovich, & Bunds, 2015).

A crisis event can be defined as a sudden, unexpected occurrence that disrupts an organization’s normal operating procedures, threatens perceptions of the organization, and potentially impedes the organization’s ability to achieve high priority goals (Elsbach, 2006; Hargis & Watt, 2010; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). Organizational leaders are tasked with responding to crisis events by implementing strategies that address the crisis, maintain organizational responsibilities, and reaffirm organizational values. The ideal organizational response to a crisis event resolves the crisis and protects the organizational reputation (Coombs, & Holladay, 2002) by cultivating attitudes toward the organization among internal and external stakeholders (Elsbach, 2006). Further, the extent to which organizational leaders address the ethical issues of the crisis event may determine the extent to which the organizational response resolves or exacerbated the damage to the organization’s perception.

Accordingly, Kellison et al. (2015) set forth the model of organizational response to a crisis event, distinguishing three decision-making paths: Resolution, Escalation, and Pacification. Resolution describes an organizational action in which the primary ethical issues are sufficiently addressed and leaders communicate key organizational values to stakeholders. In this path, the organizational response is perceived to resolve the crisis event. In the escalation and pacification paths, however, the initial organizational action in response to a crisis event prioritizes non-moral factors, insufficiently addresses the moral values at risk, and the outcry from stakeholders compounds the crisis through a diminished perception of the organization and its leaders. Leaders must then decide whether to accept that their decision escalates the crisis, or modify the organizational response to pacify stakeholders’ ethical concerns.

In this study, we perform a case study of the organizational response of the University of Maryland to the death of a football player under its supervision. Using the model set forth by Kellison et al. (2015), the authors will analyze the organizational response—including multiple investigations; the recommendation of the Board of Regents to retain the head coach; the subsequent outcry from members of the University of Maryland community, media and public; the university president’s decision to fire the head coach; and the resignation of the President of the Board of Trustees (Rittenberg & VanHaaren, 2018). In conducting this case study, we seek to further examine that grounded framework and build on the theoretical foundations of Kellison et al. Additionally, we seek to better understand the ethical considerations and stakeholder dynamics prominently involved in resolving an organizational crisis.