



## Crisis Communication Strategies in the #MeToo Era

Eden Gillott Bowe • November 15, 2018

The #MeToo movement raised awareness as to the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment in business, politics, and academia.

Consider a few of the recent high-profile cases involving universities:

- In March, [Michigan State University's Dean of Osteopathic Medicine](#) was arrested and charged with mishandling abuse complaints against Larry Nasser, and two months later MSU agreed to pay [\\$500 million to victims](#).
- In May, [USC's President](#) was forced out over his handling of several scandals, including misconduct toward female students.
- In August, the *New York Times* reported about a respected [female NYU professor](#) accused of verbally and physically harassing a male PhD student.

Let's look at what you need to know *now* so you can effectively handle problems in the future that will affect your university's reputation.

### **Protect yourself by being proactive**

If you've ever ridden the subway in New York City, you know the rule "If you see something, say something." Never ignore, cover up, or take steps that make it appear you're covering up a situation.

As soon as you become aware of a complaint, investigate it. Don't brush it aside, or you may create a crisis that could have been avoided.

If there are multiple complaints against a "star" faculty member or an administrator who brings in lots of grants or donations, it may be tempting to look the other way. Don't do it. Even though it may seem like a difficult decision at the time, the safety of your students and the reputation of your university are at stake.

Be careful what you put into writing. This is important on two levels. It's critical to avoid legal trouble, and you should never commit jokes or inappropriate comments to writing. They will come back to haunt you, and the public will tear you apart. Better yet, remove inappropriate comments from your thoughts and conversations entirely.

### **Handling legal issues**

Regardless of whether the situation begins with a lawsuit, make sure legal affairs is brought in early and consulted often. Their purpose is to protect you and the university. They can't do their job effectively if you don't involve them.

### **When should you go public?**

The same is true with public relations. When to go public and what to say (and not say) are strategic. But one rule is basic: The sooner the better. If the issue is likely to become public, you want to be the one who discloses it.

Why? This gives you more control over the conversation. Whoever goes first sets the tone of the story. While you don't want to rush out armed with misinformation, you must avoid looking like you waited until you were forced to disclose.

Conversely, if you are aware of an issue and sit on that information for months (or years), the public blowback will be fierce. You will destroy your credibility. And once trust is lost, it's hard to regain.

What about staff, donors, and other stakeholders? In addition to the media, you need to communicate with your various stakeholders. While each group will have different concerns and questions, your underlying message to all of them needs to be the same. Remember that anything you say to one group may be heard by others and anything you send to anyone may get leaked to the media.

### **Who should be the spokesperson?**

It depends on who's qualified and credible, and who's comfortable speaking on the university's behalf. The dean, head of the department in question, or director of communications are usually the face of the organization.

Make sure you or your spokesperson is prepared with talking points that have been carefully crafted, scrubbed of any PR no-no's, and approved by general counsel. Stick to the talking points, and don't go off-

script. If it's an extremely sensitive or high-stakes legal issue, your attorney may be the best to insulate you from saying something that may get you into hot water legally.

### **What should be said and what shouldn't?**

It's a delicate balance that depends on the specific situation and the university's values. Choose your words carefully.

Never lie because the truth always seems to find a way into the light.

Never speculate because there may be inaccurate information. Speculation can inadvertently feed into people's fears and open you up to legal trouble.

Be sympathetic but not overly emotional. Talk about what you're doing to fix the issue and make sure it never happens again. Address the issue without minimizing its importance but focus on the future.

Don't use emotionally charged words, even if the media is using them.

Never say, "No comment." That makes you look guilty.

### **Can you just hide from reporters?**

No. Make sure that all staff understand the importance of having a designated spokesperson who's responsible for delivering accurate information. Your staff should be trained to say with confidence, "The best person for you to speak to on this matter is [name of spokesperson], our [title]."

### **How to handle unsubstantiated allegations**

Extremely carefully. Treat each complaint seriously. If your investigation finds the allegation(s) to be unsubstantiated, consult with legal affairs, have the appropriate official respond with the investigator's conclusions, and offer an opportunity for the accuser to provide more information (if available).

### **The when, how, and if of conducting an investigation**

While you should do an internal investigation, you also often want to hire an independent investigator. This sends the message that you've got nothing to hide and are committed to learning the truth.

Conversely, the optics can be bad if you rely solely on an internal investigation and it finds no fault. Even if it finds a few issues, the public may believe the most damning "facts" are being swept under the rug.

### **Justifying termination or discipline**

You're never going to make everyone happy. Some people will always think you should have done more. Others will believe you overreacted.

Which is the best route? Consult with your legal department or counsel. Keep public communications brief and succinct.

### **Moving forward**

Live up to your promises. Tighten your processes. Make sure that the university's culture is aligned and adopts the changes. Actions speak louder than words. People have an incredible capacity to forgive. But don't abuse it—or the public's reaction may be fierce.

**Editor's Note:** The focus of this article is on communication advice and not responsible employee procedures under Title IX. A responsible employee, according to Title IX, includes anyone a student believes could have the authority to take action to redress sexual violence or misconduct.

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