Case Study: The Crash of Germanwings Flight 9525

On March 24, 2015, Germanwings Flight 9525 left Barcelona-El Prat Airport in Spain and headed for Düsseldorf Airport in Germany. En route, the plane crashed into the French Alps. All 150 people on board were killed. The cause of the crash was initially unclear, but was revealed upon discovery of the black box. During the flight, the pilot, Captain Patrick Sondenheimer, left the cockpit to use the restroom. At this point, the co-pilot, First Officer Andreas Lubitz, locked the door to the cockpit and proceeded to take the plane into a sharp descent. He ignored Sondenheimer’s pleas to let him in and crashed the plane into the mountains.

It was later revealed that Lubitz had been treated for depression and suicidal tendencies prior to becoming a pilot. Reportedly, Lubitz’s vision was deteriorating which aggravated his depression, as he thought it would cost him his job (Glum, 2016). Lubitz did research into rapid plane descent and how to lock the cockpit door in the days before the crash (Glum, 2016). Information was also released stating that Lubitz had practiced rapid descent in a previous flight (Glum, 2016).

The people killed in the crash hailed from 15 different countries (Glum, 2016). There were citizens of Germany, Spain, Argentina, the U.S., Australia, Belgium, Iran, Morocco, Mexico, Holland, Denmark, Japan, Venezuela, the U.K. and Colombia (Glum, 2016). Most of those killed were young people, including a class of German high-schoolers.

Lufthansa is the parent company to Germanwings, and in response to the crisis, they worked closely with PR agency Burson-Marsteller (Bradley, 2015). The two companies have been partnering together since 2006 (Bradley, 2015). There is no clear outline of the company’s communication strategies available to the public, but one can make inferences from the way
Lufthansa handled the crisis. The stakeholders the company seemed to put most focus on were the media and the families of the victims.

Other stakeholders which may have been identified were the airline employees, company shareholders, potential customers and the airline. If these stakeholders were not identified, they should have been. Another thing they might have done better would be to separate the families of the victims into separate groups based on nationality. Different countries have different customs and different responses to tragedies. It would have been beneficial to Lufthansa to identify the differences in the families based on nationality and tradition. Then they could strategize on how they would need to be addressed accordingly.

The research done was primarily primary research, as it sought to answer specific questions with newly generated information. Lufthansa officials needed to answer the following questions: Who was on board? Where were they from? Where did the black boxes end up? Was this an accident or was it intentional? Who was responsible? Most importantly, how did the crash happen and could it have been prevented?

The research done to answer these questions was not only primary research, but it was qualitative research as well. Officials needed to know why the plane crashed. What were the motives? Could it have been prevented? Quantitative research was unnecessary and inappropriate to the situation. When managing a crisis that involves loss of life, it’s important to be sensitive and keep the needs of the affected parties at the top of the priority list. In addition to this, there was no quantitative data to be studied, aside from the number of victims and the logistics of the crash.
Because of these research strategies, neither polls nor surveys were used. These types of research were unnecessary, as the general public was very vocal about their opinions on the crash. According to Roger Cobb and David Primo in 2003, “plane crashes receive media coverage disproportionate to their death toll,”. Thus, the general public received regular updates on the crash of Flight 9525, and they were vocal about their opinions. This is why traditional forms of research were unnecessary.

As previously stated, Lufthansa’s crisis communication strategy was not outlined for the public. However, its objectives can be easily identified. The primary objectives were informational. Lufthansa needed to find out as much information about the crash as quickly as possible and then convey that information to its publics in a timely and truthful manner. First and foremost, they needed to know how the crash had happened and who was affected, so that they could identify their publics.

Behavioral objectives revolved around being proactive. Lufthansa needed to send people to the crash site, contact the families of the victims, sustain a prompt and truthful relationship with their stakeholders, maintain their reputation and be accessible and available to their publics. Attitudinal objectives were to approach all other objectives with a mournful yet level-headed attitude.

All of the stated objectives are classic conflict management steps. One of the most important parts of crisis communication is to put in effort 24/7 to meet the needs of the stakeholders. Lufthansa seems to have made this a priority, and their approach to the crisis has been lauded by public relations professionals around the world. However, a few of their objectives were not executed well and ended up backfiring in certain areas.
The tactics that Lufthansa implemented were generally very well carried out. The CEO of Lufthansa, Carsten Spohr, released a video statement on the Germanwings website within 24 hours of the crash (Lufthansa, 2015). This statement was the only one to be posted on the Germanwings website. Spohr expressed his sorrow as he explained what had happened, and he thanked the public for their continued sympathy and loyalty (Lufthansa, 2015). This utilized the principles of communication, as we can gather more information from body language and spoken words than we could from a written statement.

Once the victims had been identified, Lufthansa gave the families of each victim 50,000 euros to cover immediate costs (Petroff, 2015). Lufthansa and Burson-Marsteller both changed their logos to black and white versions to pay respect to the victims (Bradley, 2015). This symbolism is yet another use of the principles of communication. When it was discovered that Lubitz intentionally crashed the plane, Lufthansa officials owned up to it. They have been praised by public relations professionals everywhere for continuing to be forthright with information even when it may hurt the company’s reputation. Because of their attitude, this may have actually saved the company a lot of hurt.

Since the crash, a few new policies have been implemented by Lufthansa, as well as other airline companies in order to prevent this from happening again. One of the concerning aspects of the crash was that a safety measure implemented after September 11, 2001 was what enabled Lubitz to lock the cockpit. After the infamous terrorist attack on New York City, airline companies installed “impregnable cockpits” to prevent hijackings (Davies, 2015). This was what allowed Lubitz to prevent Sondenheimer from entering the cockpit during the descent.
Many airlines have now created policies that require two people to be in the cockpit at all times (Glum, 2016). This allows the continued use of the specialized cockpit without running the risk of one pilot locking the other out. Lufthansa also loosened restrictions on doctor-patient privacy in order to make it easier for doctors to report individuals who may not be fit for duty (Glum, 2016). Lufthansa has also since changed the name Germanwings to Eurowings.

In crisis management, interaction between a company and its publics is essential. It’s important to note whether or not Lufthansa did a successful job of listening to its publics and if it responded accordingly. For the most part, they seem to have gauged public opinion pretty effectively and responded well. However, Lufthansa received mixed reviews in the aftermath of the crash.

A few opinion leaders commented on the crash, including Barack Obama, the President of the United States. Obama called the crash especially heartbreaking, considering the number of young people on the plane (Lavender, 2015). This may have generated more sympathy for the crash victims while simultaneously prompting more questions from a wider audience: how did this happen? Who is to blame?

As far as evaluation goes, it’s unclear whether or not Burson-Marsteller had a specific evaluation method in place to measure their progress. They may have used general public opinion as a gauge. They may have looked to social media platforms to indicate how customers were responding. Many used the hashtag #indeepsorrow when posting about the crash (Davies, 2015). It’s possible that Burson-Marsteller used this as a research tool. The hashtag has been adopted for many other tragedies which have occurred across Europe since last March, such as the truck attack in South France.
It is also unclear whether or not Lufthansa changed the budget airline’s name to Eurowings as part of their crisis management plan or if the name change was necessary because of poor response to their recovery efforts. If it was a conscious effort, it was a smart move. The name “Germanwings” will always be associated with the crash of Flight 9525, but Eurowings will not.

Changing the name to “Eurowings” is a total re-branding effort which would have been beneficial to the company. When you google “Germanwings,” the first results revolve around the crash. If you google “Eurowings,” the first results are links to booking flights. In fact, not a single result on the first Google results page refers to Flight 9525.

Public relations professionals think Lufthansa carried out its crisis management very well. Mark Borkowski, founder and head of Borkowski PR, praised Spohr for his initial response to the tragedy, citing his “speed of communication, factual content of messaging, trust and credibility, empathy and caring, competence and expertise, honesty and openness,” (Davies, 2015). Mark Lowe, co-founder of Third City, feels that Spohr did the best he could with what he was given (Davies, 2015). “An airline can’t go silent after a tragedy; its leaders need to show empathy, the most human of qualities,” he said (Davies, 2015). “On this, Lufthansa has done a creditable job,” (Davies, 2015).

The response from the general public was a little more varied. It may have been a cultural difference that sparked the issues, but many felt that Spohr’s statement was insensitive, generalized and lacking in information. Some of the families were extremely insulted when Lufthansa offered them monetary compensation (Petroff, 2015). They felt that the company was trying to put a price on the lives of their loved ones (Petroff 2015).
It may have been a better use of Lufthansa’s time, money and effort to memorialize the victims in some way. If they had paid for funeral services, as well as recognized the victims in a more personal way, that would have been a more human response than paying the families. Attempting to pay the families was understandably looked upon as being callous and impersonal. However, no attempt at memorialization was made, and instead, Lufthansa offered even more money to some of the German victims’ families.

A translated letter from one of the German victims’ families spouted plain outrage at how Spohr handled the crisis. In the letter, they say plainly that a Lufthansa pilot killed their children (Linshi, 2015). They are grieving and angry. Not once did Spohr contact them personally (Linshi, 2015). There were no one-on-one conversations and no apologies (Linshi, 2015). In fact, there was no contact with Spohr at all (Linshi, 2015).

Though many of the accusations in the letter would turn out to be false, this is something Lufthansa should have paid more attention to. They have assigned hundreds of people to work with the families (Petroff, 2015), but in high-profile situations like this, high-profile people must be used to the maximum effect. Spohr is the face of the company, and the fact that he never contacted the families personally is seen symbolically. If Spohr never contacted them, Lufthansa as a whole never contacted them.

Unfortunately, in tragedies such as this, it’s very difficult to measure response to recovery efforts. When lives are lost, someone will always be unhappy. The fact that the crash of Flight 9525 wasn’t an accident but was in fact intentionally caused by Lubitz exacerbates the issues here. The public wants to know why he was allowed to fly. The families want justice for the
death of their loved ones. It cannot be chalked up to mechanical malfunctions or human errors. This makes recovery difficult.

The fact that Lufthansa created a policy requiring two crew members to be present in the cockpit at all times was a positive step. However, the company needed to be quicker on the uptake. According to BBC News, Ryanair and Flybe had already implemented such a policy (Lowe, 2016). Other airlines followed suit after Lufthansa created the policy (Lowe, 2016). Even now, some people are unhappy with the new policies and feel that the redesigned cockpit door is too secure (Lowe, 2016). Philip Baum, author of *Violence in the Skies: A History of Aircraft Hijacking and Bombing*, denounces the fact that the policy requires more rigorous screening of flight attendants and calls it “highly irresponsible,” (Lowe, 2016).

One thing that public relations practitioners and the general public seem to agree on is the fact that the policies surrounding doctor-patient confidentiality have been softened in the wake of the crash. Nobody could believe how many signs there were the Lubitz should have been deemed unfit to fly. In fact, one doctor had already deemed him so, but lacked the authority to report it to anyone who could actually prevent Lubitz from entering the cockpit of a plane (DiPietro, 2015). The response to this change in policy has been universally positive.

Overall, Lufthansa did a generally good job of dealing with the crisis. It’s difficult to gauge how successful they were in dealing with the aftermath, but the fact that the company itself is still up and running speaks volumes. They still pride themselves on being one of the safest airlines in operation. Generally, Lufthansa did end up addressing the issues that needed to be addressed. The one thing that could be said is that they should have focused more on their
relations with the families of the victims, as well as the timeliness of the action taken to reform their policies.
References


