

Crisis Communication – Case Study Ferguson, Missouri

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The Ferguson, Missouri Police Department was the subject of intense media scrutiny and public protests as a result of the shooting of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson on August 9th, 2014. Michael Brown committed a strong-arm robbery at a local convenience store and was later stopped by Officer Wilson. During the stop, Brown assaulted Wilson and reached for the officer's firearm. Wilson subsequently shot Brown who died at the scene. Rumors spread throughout the community that Brown was shot while his hands were up. The incident was the impetus of the "Hands up, Don't Shoot" movement and later rioting in Ferguson. Officer Wilson was not charged with a crime, and the shooting was deemed justified by a grand jury (Buchanan, et al., 2015). Police Chief Thomas Jackson held a press conference six days after the shooting to outline the incident and release the name of the officer involved. It was evident during the chief's statement that he was not organized, and he did not have a prepared script. After the speech, officers pulled the chief away due to hostile comments in the crowd (PBS Newshour, 2104). This report will examine Chief Jackson's remarks as a powerful example of how ineffective communication during a crisis created community distrust and detracted from the legitimacy of law enforcement as a source of information.

Dr. Wendy Patrick explains that during an active investigation, "One of the most delicate balancing acts faced by law enforcement professionals involves striking the right balance between satisfying the public's desire for information with the need to preserve the integrity of the investigation (Patrick, 2019)." Jackson chose to withhold information when he said that he could not disclose facts about the apprehension of Brown and deferred it the county prosecutor's office. The chief also said that he would not be taking any questions at this press conference but would at a later event in the afternoon. The chief created distrust and suspicion at the outset by these

comments. Specifically, the chief should have explained why he could not release all the details and endeavored to address the community's concerns by releasing legally permissible information. Dr. Patrick also explains that "pre-planned, vetted, well-phrased pieces of information are great sources of comfort to use during a press conference (Patrick, 2019)." The chief's statement did not conform to this guideline in that it was not an organized statement that addressed the altercation and shooting of Brown. The chief also forgot to give the officer's name involved in the shooting during his remarks until prompted by someone from the media. A further indication of the lack of preparation (PBS Newshour, 2104).

Crisis management expert, Melissa Agnes, describes that agencies should be prepared for the real-time news cycle fueled by social media. Citizens demand answers, and when an agency does not respond; distrust can form and the narrative may spiral into a direction that the department cannot control (Agnes, *How Law Enforcement Can Position Itself as the Source of Trust and Credibility in a Crisis*, 2019). The major mistake made by the Ferguson Department was that a substantive news conference was not given until six days after the incident. In the interim, there was considerable opportunity for the department's critics to establish the narrative via social media. Consequently, the chief was attempting to gain footing while already significantly behind the news cycle. Melissa Agnes further clarifies how to handle a crisis in three steps. The first is to be thoughtful and realize you will not be able to please everybody. The second is to be decisive and not go back and forth on controversial issues. The third is to produce a clear and concise statement, which does not have to be all-inclusive but is aligned with your values and leaves no room for misinterpretation. At that point, you can sit back and let the conversation unfold. (Agnes, *How to Manage Controversial Issues*, 2019).

Chief Jackson failed on these points specifically because he neglected to immediately address the public after the incident and allowed the rhetoric and rumors to formulate. Moreover, the chief when finally deciding to give a news conference was not prepared. His statement was just a recounting of data points and a timeline and not a coherent thoughtful address as to all of the concerns of the community regarding the shooting (PBS Newshour, 2104). The chief should have organized a carefully crafted script formed in conjunction with his close advisors or an expert in media relations. The chief was also not transparent when he said he would not take questions at this press conference but would later in the day. Lastly, the chief was not ready for hostility from the crowd and was pulled away from the microphones by his staff which added to the appearance of indecisiveness. In response, Michael Brown's family released a statement proclaiming why the family and community distrusted local law enforcement. Specifically due to the delayed release of the officer's name; and during the press conference the chief's allegation of Brown's involvement in the robbery which they called a smear campaign (Swaine, 2014).

In summary, the chief was ill-prepared to handle an event of this magnitude and had no pre-planning in place to communicate with citizens in a crisis. The chief mishandled an opportunity to assuage community sentiment with a professional and coherent statement. The chief continued to provide ineffective communication and at one point indicated that a non-indicted Wilson could return to work if he wished, thus further enraging protestors (Swaine, 2014). The takeaway lesson for law enforcement leaders is that preparation starts before a crisis occurs. A police chief should have a checklist on how to address the community professionally and transparently. Equally important is community engagement on a weekly basis that will build levels of trust to draw upon in the event of a controversial incident.

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