CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN | United Airlines: Passenger Dragged Off UA Flight

By: Allison Tenney, Ibeth Villa-Tamay, and Katherine Wilson

INTRODUCTION:

United Airlines values the crisis communication plan because it allows the organization to properly combat a crisis as it occurs. While having a crisis communication plan in place we feel we can approach any crisis swiftly and effectively.

If any reason would occur to where the crisis communication plan could not be followed United Airlines would look to other possible plans. We would evaluate how and why the previous plan was not followed and what we could do to the next plan to make it a better fit for our company. Although, if the steps in the crisis communication plan were not followed United Airlines could worsen the crisis or the company could take longer to recover.

The recent United Airline crisis that occurred on April 9, 2017 emphasized the need for an effective crisis communication plan. United Airlines was under severe public scrutiny after a passenger was forcibly and harmfully removed from a plane. The crisis communication plan needs to be used in situations such as this to prevent further damage to the company's reputation.

CEO STATEMENT:

At United Airlines, our crisis management and public relations teams strongly prioritize communication within our company and to our stakeholders. Here at United Airlines, everyone on our crisis management team is focused on bettering the company to benefit everyone. Our company understands a crisis is unavoidable but we believe the response made by the company shows the core values and the ability of the company to persevere through difficult times.

CMT TRAINING:

The crisis team should go through training or rehearse possible plans both tri-monthly as well as annually. The team can do orientation and functional exercise training. In orientation training, which will be done tri-monthly, the team will review the roles of each executive and members of the public relations and crisis management teams. For functional exercises, all executives and members of the PR and CM teams will join in a simulated interactive exercise. The group will test the crisis management system and how it unfolds in real-time in order to mimic crisis pressures. The group will also coordinate with other groups or teams that would be needed during the crisis, such as first responders, this exercise will be completed annually. Executives such as the CEO/ President, Head of HR and Labor Operations, Chief Communications Officer, Public Relations team, and the Crisis Management Team should all be involved in the rehearsals of these exercises. All of these individuals play a major role in the functionality and success of United Airlines, having them all be up to date on crisis management is vital to the company.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES:

Goal Statement:

To manage a crisis effectively, our CMT will ensure stakeholders receive information as soon as possible. We will also manage misinformation to effectively communicate our messages across various platforms. It is our mission to provide accurate information for the well-being of our customers, employees, and the news media.

Objectives:

1. Release statements reassuring stakeholders that action is taking place in a timely manner to demonstrate they are our priority.

2. Reestablish trust between stakeholders and the company through working on a plan to compensate those affected that shows empathy.

3. Ensure stakeholders are receiving accurate information on the steps we are taking to resolve this crisis. This will be done through research across our social media platforms to view sentimental analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

CEO/ President: _____

Head of HR and Labor Relations: _____

Chief Operations Officer: _____

Chief Commercial Officer: _____

Chief Financial Officer: _____

Chief Communications Officer: _____

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF CRISIS:

For United Airlines, a crisis occurs based on different factors. There is a crisis if our stakeholders deem there is a crisis. Other factors that determine if we have a crisis are if said crisis affects our organization in terms of operation and reputation. It can also be a crisis if the event puts our passengers' lives or affects our organization in terms of operation and reputation. Some possible crises for United Airlines would be plane accidents that do not or do have fatalities, mistreatment of passengers, flight delays that cause significant backlash from stakeholders, and terror threats. The crises listed can cause damage to our company's reputation and our stakeholder's trust in our service.

POSSIBLE CRISES AND ASSESSMENT:

Crisis Assessment Table:

CRISES ASSESSMENT:				
POSSIBLE CRISES	**LIKELIHOOD FOR CRISIS TO OCCUR**	**IMPACT OF CRISIS ON ORGANIZATION/OPERATION**	**IMPACT OF CRISIS ON STAKEHOLDERS:**	**SCORE:**
• **Mistreatment of passengers:** When our passengers experience an unpleasant experience on our flights.	0. ☐ **Impossible** 1. ☐ **Rare** (<3% chance) 2. ☐ **Unlikely** (3%-10% chance) 3. ☐ **Moderate** (10%-50% chance) 4. ☐ **Likely** (50%-90% chance) 5. ☐ **Certain** (>90% chance) **4**	0. ☐ No Impact 1. ☐ **Insignificant** (Impact is easily mitigated by normal day to day processes) 2. ☐ **Minor** (Delays up to 10% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 10%) 3. ☐ **Moderate** (Delays up to 30% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 30%) 4. ☐ **Major** (Delays up to 50% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 50%) 5. ☐ **Severe** (Operation breaks down) **4**	0. ☐ No impact on stakeholders 1. ☐ **Little impact**, can be handled without difficulty, not serious enough to draw media attention 2. ☐ **Some impact**, slight chance the media will be involved 3. ☐ **Moderate impact**, but still will not be a major media issue 4. ☐ **Considerable impact**, will definitely be a major media story 5. ☐ **Devastating impact**, front-page news, could put organization out of business **4**	**Score** **12**

● **Plane accident due to an engine failure:** Our flight crashes due to unforeseen factors.	0. ☐ **Impossible** 1. ☐ **Rare** (<3% chance) 2. ☐ **Unlikely** (3%-10% chance) 3. ☐ **Moderate (10%-50% chance)** 4. ☐ **Likely** (50%-90% chance) 5. ☐ **Certain** (>90% chance) **3**	0. ☐ No Impact 1. ☐ **Insignificant** (Impact is easily mitigated by normal day to day processes) 2. ☐ **Minor** (Delays up to 10% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 10%) 3. ☐ **Moderate** (Delays up to 30% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 30%) 4. ☐ **Major** (Delays up to 50% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 50%) 5. ☐ **Severe** (Operation breaks down) **4**	0. ☐ No impact on stakeholders 1. ☐ **Little impact**, can be handled without difficulty, not serious enough to draw media attention 2. ☐ **Some impact**, slight chance the media will be involved 3. ☐ **Moderate impact**, but still will not be a major media issue 4. ☐ **Considerable impact**, will definitely be a major media story 5. ☐ **Devastating impact**, front-page news, could put organization out of business **5**	**Score** **12**
● **Plane crash with fatalities:** Our airplane crashes with multiple fatalities.	0. ☐ **Impossible** 1. ☐ **Rare** (<3% chance) 2. ☐ **Unlikely** (3%-10% chance) 3. ☐ **Moderate (10%-50% chance)** 4. ☐ **Likely** (50%-90% chance) 5. ☐ **Certain** (>90% chance) **3**	0. ☐ No Impact 1. ☐ **Insignificant** (Impact is easily mitigated by normal day to day processes) 2. ☐ **Minor** (Delays up to 10% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 10%) 3. ☐ **Moderate** (Delays up to 30% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 30%) 4. ☐ **Major** (Delays up to 50% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 50%) 5. ☐ **Severe** (Operation breaks down) **4**	0. ☐ No impact on stakeholders 1. ☐ **Little impact**, can be handled without difficulty, not serious enough to draw media attention 2. ☐ **Some impact**, slight chance the media will be involved 3. ☐ **Moderate impact**, but still will not be a major media issue 4. ☐ **Considerable impact**, will definitely be a major media story 5. ☐ **Devastating impact**, front-page news, could put organization out of business **5**	**Score** **12**

Flight Delays: Unexpected delays cause our passengers agitation.	0. ☐ **Impossible** 1. ☐ **Rare** (<3% chance) 2. ☐ **Unlikely** (3%-10% chance) 3. ☐ **Moderate (10%-50% chance)** 4. ☐ **Likely** (50%-90% chance) 5. ☐ **Certain** (>90% chance) **3**	0. ☐ No Impact 1. ☐ **Insignificant** (Impact is easily mitigated by normal day to day processes) 2. ☐ **Minor** (Delays up to 10% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 10%) 3. ☐ **Moderate** (Delays up to 30% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 30%) 4. ☐ **Major** (Delays up to 50% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 50%) 5. ☐ **Severe** (Operation breaks down) **4**	0. ☐ No impact on stakeholders 1. ☐ **Little impact**, can be handled without difficulty, not serious enough to draw media attention 2. ☐ **Some impact**, slight chance the media will be involved 3. ☐ **Moderate impact**, but still will not be a major media issue 4. ☐ **Considerable impact**, will definitely be a major media story 5. ☐ **Devastating impact**, front-page news, could put an organization out of business **3**	**Score** **10**

				Score
● **Terror Threat:** Our airline recieves a threat that affects our business and passengers.	0. ☐ **Impossible** 1. ☐ **Rare** (<3% chance) 2. ☐ **Unlikely (3%-10% chance)** 3. ☐ **Moderate** (10%-50% chance) 4. ☐ **Likely** (50%-90% chance) 5. ☐ **Certain** (>90% chance) **2**	0. ☐ No Impact 1. ☐ **Insignificant** (Impact is easily mitigated by normal day to day processes) 2. ☐ **Minor** (Delays up to 10% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 10%) 3. ☐ **Moderate** (Delays up to 30% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 30%) 4. ☐ **Major** (Delays up to 50% of Schedule; Operation affected up to 50%) 5. ☐ **Severe** (Operation breaks down) **4**	0. ☐ No impact on stakeholders 1. ☐ **Little impact**, can be handled without difficulty, not serious enough to draw media attention 2. ☐ **Some impact**, slight chance the media will be involved 3. ☐ **Moderate impact**, but still will not be a major media issue 4. ☐ **Considerable impact**, will definitely be a major media story 5. ☐ **Devastating impact**, front-page news, could put an organization out of business **4**	**10**

POSSIBLE CRISES AND THREATS:

POSSIBLE CRISES	THREATS/WARNING SIGNS	IMMEDIATE ACTION
● **Mistreatment of Passengers**	● A flight has been overbooked and a passenger must exit the aircraft ● A passenger is forced to exit the aircraft but gets injured in the process. ● Other passengers witnessed the incident and no longer feel safe on the aircraft.	● Alert the CEO/ President and Crisis Management Team ● Ask passengers to stay calm and remain seated on the aircraft. ● Statements should be made to the family of the injured passenger as well as the media regarding the incident.

• **Plane accident due to an engine failure**	• The engine of the plane begins to fail during a flight. • Pilots are forced to land the aircraft before reaching their destination. • Passengers begin to worry about their safety while aboard the aircraft.	• United Airlines will alert first responders and air traffic control. • Investigate where the problem began or who was working on the aircraft prior to take-off. • Verify that all passengers are safe upon landing the aircraft.
• **Plane crash with fatalities**	• Majority of people aboard the aircraft are injured or died upon a crash landing. • The pilots were not able to execute a safe landing in time. • Families affected want to know why the aircraft went down.	• Alert first responders to the scene. • United Airlines will release a holding statement regarding the crash and the number of current injuries and fatalities. • The Crisis Management Team will begin to monitor social media and assist in releasing statements to its various accounts.
• **Flight Delays**	• Passengers will not be able to reach their intended destination on time. • Passengers may become irate and request refunds or compensation for having to wait.	• United Airlines will alert all passengers that have purchased tickets for the delayed flights. • Alert poliots, flight attendants, and other employees involved in United Airlines flights why the flights are being delayed. • Let passengers know that they will be compensated for having to wait for their flights.
• **Terror threats**	• The threats are made from a passenger prior to take-off. • Passengers become upset and fearful and do not wish to board the aircraft.	• Alert the authorities of the threats being made. • Ground all flights until further notice. • United Airlines will release a holding statement to the public as to what is going on and any updates on the threats.

IDENTIFY AND NOTIFY KEY PUBLICS:

Immediate Crisis Message/Holding Statements:

CRISIS TYPE:	HOLDING STATEMENT: INTERNAL PUBLICS	HOLDING STATEMENT: EXTERNAL PUBLICS
● Mistreatment of passengers	An incident has occurred on one of our flights where airport security has mistreated a passenger. As a result, this flight has been delayed till further notice. Please listen to management on how to respond to handling individual flights. We will release more information on what occurred as we become aware. Thank you so much.	An isolated incident has occurred on one of the flights delaying the flight. No other flights have been affected. We will update you as soon as more information becomes available.
● Plane accident due to an engine failure	There has been an incident on one of our flights currently in the air. An engine has failed, the plane is still able to fly but will be landing at the nearest airport. Once the plane lands we will launch an investigation as to why this has occurred. We will keep you updated and notify you all once the plane has landed. Please join us in wishing for a safe landing, thank you.	One of our flights is experiencing a few technical issues. The plane is still more than capable of flying but will be landing at the nearest airport. We are beyond sorry if this affects you, or anyone you care about. Thank you for understanding we are doing this for the safety of our passengers and employees.
● Plane crash with fatalities	There has been a plane crash which occurred approximately two hours ago. At this point, we are unsure of the state of those on the plane. First responders are on the scene, and we have begun an investigation. Our best wishes are with everyone on the plane. When more information is made available we will update you.	A plane crashed today about two hours ago. First responders are on the scene, and we have launched an investigation. Our thoughts go out to everyone on the plane. As more information becomes available we will continue to make updates.
● Flight Delays	Currently, due to an unforeseen snowstorm, all of our flights will be delayed until tomorrow. Then we will reevaluate the weather to see if it is safe for our flights to resume. Thank you for your understanding.	Unfortunately, due to an unforeseen snowstorm, we have decided to ground all flights for the safety of our employees and our customers. We understand this is frustrating. We will release more information on changing flights shortly. Thank you for bearing with us during this time.
● Terror threats	A message has come in threatening one of our flights if they take off. Due to this threat, all flights will be postponed until the threat is investigated. We will update you as soon as we receive information from this investigation. At this time no more threats have been made involving any other planes. We appreciate your cooperation and patience	Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond our control, all flights are grounded for the time being. We understand how frustrating this is and will be working to refund your tickets and offer vouchers for later flights. When more information becomes available as to when flights will resume we will update all of our social media platforms and websites immediately. Thank you for bearing with us, during this time.

Notification Table

Communication Channels										
Internal Publics		**Video Meetings**	**Intranet**	**(Mobile) Phone**	**Email**	**Interview**	**Newsletter**	**Press Release**	**Social Media**	**Spokes-person**	**Website**
	Employees	X		X	X						
	Management	X		X	X						
	Board of Directors	X		X	X						
	Shareholders/ Investors	X								X	
	Suppliers	X								X	
	Distributors	X								X	

	Retailers	X								X	
External Publics	General Public						X	X	X	X	X
	Customers				X		X		X	X	
	News Media					X		X	X	X	
	Community Leaders				X			X	X	X	
	NGOs/Activists							X	X	X	X
	Government(s)	X			X			X		X	

IDENTIFY THE CRISIS COMMUNICATION TEAM:

CRISIS COMMUNICATION TEAM/CRISIS DIRECTORY

JOB TITLE	ROLE & RESPONSIBILITY
Public Relations Committee	Public Relations responsibility is to inform the public and stakeholders of acts taken by the company. This is critical during a crisis because the public needs to be stayed updated or the crisis could spiral in response to moral outrage.
Lawyers	Lawyers should ensure the company's actions will not respond in any legal backlash including possible lawsuits. Their job is also to ensure the company will not face any legal ramifications especially in regard to public statements in response to a crisis.
CEO	The leader of the company should be involved in decisions especially after a crisis. The CEO needs to ensure that the standards of the company are being held to ensure stakeholders that the company will recover. The CEO should be informed on decisions, and look at how they can affect the aftermath, especially considering stocks and investors.
Communication Strategist/Spokesperson	A communications strategist is needed to write speeches and keep departments updated on steps being taken during a crisis. A spokesperson is needed to properly speak to the public/media and inform them of the situation and how United Airlines will respond.
Financial Team	A Financial Team's job is to design the company budget and make sure the company spends their money responsibly. They are also responsible for relinquishing funds in the event a crisis needs to be supplemented in relief funds.
Aeronautical/Flight Engineer	An Aeronautical or Flight Engineer should understand the mechanics and operations of the planes. They are responsible mainly in technological crises to be able to attribute responsibility. They are needed to ensure the plane can operate smoothly and safely.
Security/Safety Officers	Security/safety officers are needed to ensure that all employees are safe. They are also there to bring peace and order so the situation does not continue to escalate.

IDENTIFY SPOKESPERSONS

CRISIS SPOKESPERSONS

COMMUNICATION SITUATION	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	PERSONALITY TRAITS
· **Press Conference**	- Knows all the details of the crisis (who, what, when, where, why) - Is aware of possible difficult questions and how to answer them	- Fast-acting - Can word answers well - Think quickly	- Remains calm and in control in stressful situations - Is not argumentative when answering questions
· **Social Media**	- Is aware of the audiences on social media - Knows the details of the crisis - Preps content as information continues to come in	- Use clear and concise language while also expressing empathy and compassion - Adapt to different platforms quickly	- Remains professional in an untraditional setting - Uses appropriate tone across platforms
· **Live Interviews**	- Knows all of the key messages and possible difficult questions - Knows how to respond to questions that they know will be asked	- Think quickly and be able to deliver answers in a timely manner - Is prepared for trickier questions that could be asked	- Works well under pressure but remains in control of the interview - Show empathy for those affected and is able to communicate that in an empathic manner

Handling Difficult Questions
Crisis #1: Organizational misdeed

<u>Trick Question:</u> If employees had properly de-escalated the situation, could this have been avoided?

<u>Trick Question:</u> Isn't it true that you knew you were overbooked before the scheduled flight?

<u>Trick Question:</u> Do you believe the crisis could have been avoided if the passengers were willing to rebook their flight?

<u>Trick Question:</u> Do you agree on how differently this could have been handled?

<u>Trick Question:</u> We know action is taking place. We just have additional questions to clarify some of the facts, okay?

Crisis #2: Human-error accidents

<u>Trick Question:</u> Who do you believe is responsible for this accident?

<u>Trick Question:</u> Do you think the company is responsible for not implementing proper training?

<u>Trick Question:</u> Do you think the environment at work is responsible for this accident?

<u>Trick Question:</u> Off the record, do you think the company is directly responsible for this?

<u>Trick Question:</u> If the error had been caught prior to take off, could this have been avoided?

MESSAGING

MESSAGE MAPS

Crisis #1: Organizational Misdeed

Key Stakeholders: Employees, Public, and Media

Concerns and/or Questions: What are you currently doing to prevent this crisis from occurring again?

Key Message #1: We are working with our employees and increasing training.

> **Supporting Fact:** All employees are well versed through training in social interactions with customers/passengers.

> **Supporting Fact:** Management and employees are trained on how to handle passengers who are more vocal or potentially aggressive in a peaceful manner.

> **Supporting Fact:** All employees must complete several training hours and pass practice courses on potential issues.

Key Message #2: We are adhering to the recommendations from our crisis management team

> **Supporting Fact:** The Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) guidelines and recommendations are being followed.

> **Supporting Fact:** The scenarios outlined within the crisis communication plan are tested and practiced a minimum of twice a year.

> **Supporting Fact:** We ensure everyone on the crisis communication plan has received proper training in potential crises.

Key Message #3: Policies and Protocols are being tested and updated to ensure the best for our stakeholders.

> **Supporting Fact:** Policies and protocols for a variety of issues are tested every few months by all staff.

> **Supporting Fact:** We release customer reviews so we can see what needs more attention.

> **Supporting Fact:** We revise protocols after incidents occur.

MESSAGE MAPS

Crisis #2: Human-error accident

Key Stakeholder: Employees, Public, & Media

Concerns and/or Questions: What are you doing to ensure this does not occur again?

Key Message #1: We are working with the public to assist those affected.

> **Supporting Fact:** Victims will receive compensation.

> **Supporting Fact:** Victims and their families will have resources to aid them.

> **Supporting Fact:** We are releasing a formal apology.

Key Message #2: We are reshaping our policies.

> **Supporting Fact:** We are looking into new training for all employees.

> **Supporting Fact:** We are monitoring old policies to see how efficient they are.

> **Supporting Fact:** We are updating our staff as these changes are made.

Key Message #3: Our team is working closely to inspect changes that need to occur.

> **Supporting Fact:** Our crisis management team is developing a new crisis plan.

> **Supporting Fact:** We are ensuring all of our crisis management team is properly trained.

> **Supporting Fact:** All employees will be retrained and tested to ensure they have the needed knowledge.

LESSONS LEARNED
CRISIS EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENTS

CRISIS REVIEW FORM

	CRISIS RESPONSES	MEDIA MANAGEMENT	STAKEHOLDER-RELATIONS
SUCCESSFUL	- Once the crisis was exposed to social media, the first response was released in a timely manner.	- Unsuccessful media coverage.	-Unsuccessful stakeholder-relations
PROBLEMATIC	- In the first response, blamed Dr. Dao. - Releasing false conflicting information. For example, calling it an overbook situation when the flight had not been overbooked. - Not Directly apologizing to Dr. Dao.	- Videos of the incident occurring conflicting prior statements. - Not truly apologizing on social media until after 24 hours later	- Addressing stakeholders after being spoken poorly of in the court of public opinion.
SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT	- Address the situation as soon as it happens. - Do not blame Dr. Dao for something that was United Airlines' fault.	- Apologize directly to passengers and Dr. Dao in statements across platforms and in interviews - Do not let the videos released on the incident oppose the statements being made	- Speak more highly of your stakeholders, especially in situations of crisis.