

Stakeholder Behavior: What Drives Their Behavior?

For

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Mechelle Little

University of Denver, University College

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Faculty: Chris Huizenga, MNA.

Director: Magdelana Red, PhD.

Dean: Michael J. McGuire, MLS.

Introduction

I have been retained by the Communications Department of USA Gymnastics to conduct research on stakeholder behavior after a recent crisis that has deeply impacted the organization. The first goal of my research is to analyze how stories and engagement plans can heal the damage done to my selected groups of stakeholders. My second goal is to enable behavioral methods to communicate USA Gymnastics' mission to provide a safe and positive environment for athletes, families and staff with new policies and resources.

Crisis of USA Gymnastics

USA Gymnastics is the National Governing Body for the sport of Gymnastics in the United States. USA Gymnastics has a long-standing history of producing medal-winning teams at the Summer Olympic Games and World Championships under the leadership of coaches such as Bela and Martha Karolyi.

This organization has faced scandals and lawsuits involving sexual abuse spanning over two decades. In 2016, Larry Nassar, the former national team doctor of USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University sports medicine doctor, was accused of multiple counts of sexual abuse of over 200 women, including member of the U.S. Gymnastics team. In January 2018, 156 women shared their stories of survival in court. Nassar was then sentenced to 175 years in prison for criminal sexual abuse and child pornography. This also resulted in the departure of their CEO, loss of sponsorship and the investigation of staff, including the Karolyis. Current and former members of the national team, including Aly Raisman, Jordyn Wieber and McKayla Maroney, have lost trust in the organization for condoning Nassar's behavior and for not

protecting them. USA Gymnastics is continuing to rebound from this crisis and rebuild itself as a safe and positive environment for gymnasts.

Identification of Stakeholders

Like many brands and organizations, USA Gymnastics has both active and passive stakeholder groups that have a great impact on the organization's reputation and future. Public Relations practitioners build their goals and objectives based on analyzing what type of information that stakeholders are looking for and what influences their decision making process.

The first stakeholder group are current and future athletes of USA Gymnastics. Current athletes participating in competitive or recreational programs represent the internal audience that were affected by this crisis while future athletes represent the external audience that USA Gymnastics is trying to recruit for their programs. This group of stakeholders is classified as active because athletes are the root of USA Gymnastics.

The second stakeholder group are families of current and future athletes. Like athletes, they also represent internal and external audiences to recruit and retain. I classified this group as passive stakeholders because they have an indirect involvement and investment with the organization through their children.

The third stakeholder group are the USA Gymnastics coaches and medical staff. Their role is to train, treat and guide gymnasts to become world class athletes and to represent the United States on the world stage. As a result of Nassar's charges, many coaches, trainers and doctors are being investigated about covering up or ignoring Nassar's abuse as well as not being fully aware of what was happening. Along with the organization, this crisis has also impacted

their credibility. They are active stakeholders because of their direct involvement with athletes, families and the organization.

The fourth and final group of stakeholders are media that have provided sponsorship of USA Gymnastics. Proctor & Gamble (P&G) and Kellogg's have been primary corporate sponsors of USA Gymnastics throughout the Olympic Games. However, this recent crisis has shifted their relationship with the organization by not renewing sponsorship contracts. Representatives from P&G and Kellogg's stated that they are "supportive of the broader actions taking place via the USOC Safe Sport program" and that they are "hopeful the steps the USAG is taking to put policies and procedures in place will ensure a safe and positive environment for all athletes." (Bieler, 2017). Both are active stakeholders because of their investment of the organization and the large influence they have over fans and the general public.

Research of Stakeholder Groups - Methods

Throughout Nassar's investigation and trial, storytelling touched all stakeholder groups, the media and a mass audience consisting of athletes and non-athletes. Personal narratives of survival from Aly Raisman and many other gymnasts and individuals who survived Nassar's abuse made a huge impact on the jury and media outlets everywhere. "Life happens in narratives we tell one another. A story can go where quantitative analysis is denied admission: our hearts" (Monarth, 2014). To see through the eyes of my stakeholder groups, I used two behavior-changing methods to conduct research on how I can address their concerns and use stories to create proactive engagement plans to benefit each group.

I applied the social cognitive theory to my stakeholders. This theory is defined as "a behavior model that is central to observational learning. By observing a model, individuals

can learn a behavior in ways that appeal to them.” (Hinayard & Kreuter 2007, 782). Social cognitive theory can be applied through telling personal narratives as a way to build trust with the audience and influence behavior.

Athletes and their families have safety concerns. This crisis also had them questioning whether they should participate in the sport or if their voices would be heard in similar situations. Watching testimonials and reading story accounts from fellow gymnasts and other survivors can promote feelings of empowerment and provide athletes and their families with credible role models to base their behavior as leaders.

This is also important for coaches to utilize. The coach-pupil relationship involves trust and is essential for building strength and character. Coaches and trainers are portrayed as role models to demonstrate what physical and social characteristics athletes should have. In my personal experience as a figure skater, I’ve modeled my work ethic and leadership skills after coaches and trainers who’ve positively impacted my life. Many of the coaches and medical staff at USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University did not feel like they were to blame for this situation. Many thought that Nassar was the best doctor to treat their athletes and claimed to be unaware of his behavior. Regardless, it is important to communicate to the coaches and medical staff that how one adult in a leadership role can shape the behaviors and attitudes of young athletes.

P&G and Kellogg’s have used national team members like Simone Biles and Laurie Hernandez as ambassadors for brands such as Special K and Crest. Since consumers of these brands are primarily women and adolescent girls, many of them model their attitudes, habits and behaviors after seeing athletes like Biles and Hernandez using these products.

The second method I applied was the precaution adoption model. This behavioral model is defined as “a cognitive-stage model of preventive behavior but pays special attention to the influence of others’ behaviors and opinions on a person’s perceived vulnerability and preventive responses.” (Hinayard & Kreuter 2007, 783). This method helps individuals, brands and organizations looking at what happened and taking preventative measures to avoid and/or better mitigate crises in the future. The message that the survivors communicated through their personal stories was to prevent abuse from happening to any athletes again.

Proposed Engagement Plans

My analysis on each of my stakeholder groups allowed me to gain a better understanding of how invested they are in USA Gymnastics and what desired outcomes they are looking for. “If you listen to your customers, you may get incremental improvements to products that you already offer” (White, 2014). This applies to stakeholder analysis because without stepping into their shoes and fully understanding their thoughts and feelings, we would not be able to improve our products and brands. After conducting my research, I have proposed four engagement plans for each of my stakeholder groups to support their outcomes, thoughts and feelings as well as promoting USA Gymnastics as a credible, healthy and safe organization.

I will reiterate to current and future athletes that USA Gymnastics has listened to their concerns and will apply their feedback to fix the problem. National Governing Bodies in the Olympic and Paralympic Movements are now utilizing Safe Sport policies. The mission of Safe Sport is to end all forms of abuse and harassment in athletics. As USA Gymnastics works to implement more Safe Sport policies, I plan to encourage athletes in online trainings featuring

members of Team USA. These trainings will emphasize how to recognize forms of abuse or harassment, how to fill out reports and how to tell an adult. I will also work with the Communications Department to create a public relations campaign to market USA Gymnastics' commitment to safety and fun.

Since families of athletes have seen stories of this crisis on television, social media and newspaper, I plan to conduct a public relations tour on morning talk shows and family friendly events. These direct forms of advertising will communicate the benefits of participating in gymnastics while putting safety as a priority. Like athletes, families are also encouraged to participate in online Safe Sport trainings. This participating will also convert families into active stakeholders.

To engage coaches and medical staff, I plan to conduct regional meetings to provide resources on these new policies. I will reiterate that USA Gymnastics wants to make sure that everyone is doing the right thing for athletes and staff. Even though this is new, it is important to work closely to help them understand why this is important for the organization as a whole.

Finally, I will meet with public relations representatives for P&G and Kellogg's to solve this problem and to re-evaluate partnerships. Since the athletes are not fault and USA Gymnastics has delivered for them in the past, future champions can also tell great stories and be exceptional ambassadors for their brands. Both companies can continue current partnerships with Simone Biles and Laurie Hernandez, but can discuss sponsoring additional athletes in follow-up meetings.

In summary, I have been able to gain a deeper understanding of what drives stakeholder behavior through analysis and. I hope to provide a positive impact for organizations like USA Gymnastics through proposed engagement plans and continuous communication tactics.

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