

Reprinted from

HARTFORD BUSINESS JOURNAL

December 20, 2010

TALKING POINTS

Corporate WikiLeaks? Let the Games Begin

By Andrea Obston

Expect the WikiLeaks' sideshow to stop at a boardroom near you. Corporate leaders who chortled over the secret musings about world leaders from U.S. officials may not find this round quite so amusing.

Quirky WikiLeaks' President Julian Assange recently told *Forbes* that he plans to publish a "treasure trove" of documents about the secrets of corporate America early next year. He revealed that these leaks will cover the pharmaceutical, tech and financial industries. The announcement sent shockwaves through corporate America. Rumors that the first target might be Bank of America sent the stock down three percent in early December.

Crisis communications (and what we in the field smugly call "crisis management") is all about anticipating risks and preparing for them. But how do you plan for the public airing of your employees' most candid thoughts about your company, your competitors or the food in the cafeteria? After all, no one thinks their e-mail ramblings will be splashed across the web. Those things are private, right?

Wrong.

So, how does a corporate prepare for this kind of assault?

Look at Your Corporate Culture

Snarly comments about competitors, vendors, executives and employees are the stuff WikiLeaks feeds on. If your company's

culture tolerates or even encourages this kind of behavior, your e-mails are going to be particularly damaging in the light of day. Think of the harm to important business relationships and employee morale if they became public. Then, consider a sea change in your company's attitude towards this kind of behavior.

Trash talk tolerance comes from the top, so that's the place to start to model a different kind of behavior. A president who makes snide or personally offensive remarks about competitors sends the message that he's fine if others in the company do so too. In fact, it might be a great idea to use WikiLeaks' recent revelations as the impetus for such a change.

How would your competitors feel about being described as having a "chip on their shoulder" or a strategic partner react to knowing someone in your c-suite sees him as "erratic"? Not well and that's not good.

If your company's mission uses words like "respect," "honesty" or "integrity" now is a really good time to adjust your behavior to match those ideals. If the idea that this is good business isn't enough, just throw up the specter of WikiLeaks as an incentive. It may just prompt people to go beyond paying lip service to those values to putting them into action in their day-to-day business practices.

Realize Unhappy Employees Make Great "Leakers"

The recent job environment has meant that a lot of disgruntled employees are staying put and outwardly tolerating more than ever before. But that doesn't mean they are happy doing it.

In fact, this could be a "teachable moment" for senior management about the

wisdom of treating employees with respect. Don't forget that the recent WikiLeaks time bombs appear to have come from someone inside the military — a low level soldier — rather than some scurrilous foreign power.

If ever you needed a reason to monitor employee sentiment and look for ways to address their concerns, this would be it. "Happy employees don't leak documents," pointed out Harlan Loeb, executive vice president and U.S. director of issues, crisis, and risk management at Edleman in a recent *Fast Company.com* article.

Update or Create Your Crisis Plans

The lessons of the Gulf Oil Spill and Hurricane Katrina have not reached most companies. Most are shockingly unprepared to communicate in a crisis.

A recent Harris Interactive poll showed that only nine percent of companies have crisis protocols in place. By contrast, 19 percent of executives said they had crisis plans on Sept. 11, 2001.

Talk about a teachable moment courtesy of Mr. Assange. This guy's the poster boy for "Plan or Be Punked."

Can you anticipate the next attack by technology that has yet to be invented? Of course not. But that doesn't mean you can't plan at all.

There are plenty of crises you can anticipate and plan for right now. Plan for what you do know and stretch a bit. Involve management and employees up and down the organization in developing a list of foreseeable crises.

And, while you're at it, remember that

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most crises are low probability/high impact events. Over 60 percent of crises are slow-growing over time. It's not the car driving through the front door that's most damaging to a corporate reputation. It's the knowingly shoddy products you turn a blind eye to over time.

You can't anticipate all crises, but can identify early warning signs that things are going downhill. Is your website unusually busy? Are your customer service people seeing a dramatic increase in calls? Is Twitter abuzz with an excess of negative comments about your company? Put systems in place to monitor such leading edge indicators before that "fire in the waste basket" becomes an inferno. We call it "Crisis Spotting." You can call it "Reputation Insurance."

Step Up and Change

So what if you do get "Assanged"? What next?

If your company is his next target,

it's best to take your medicine for the bad behavior and use your energies to improve and showcase the change. There's been talk by U.S. officials of prosecuting Assange (and some with paranoid frames of mind have even suggested that the warrant for his arrest on sexual misconduct charges is a form of this). Why not go after this mischief maker for the harm he's done, they seem to be saying?

The answer is that strategy won't change what the leaks reveal about the thoughts of U.S. government officials. The leaks reveal mean spirited and petty thoughts by those whose jobs are diplomacy. Going after them won't erase what we now know about their thoughts.

Apologies are the order of the day, not litigation. Apologies and improved behavior trump blame and finger-pointing every time. So for companies that get WikiLeaks, I'm suggesting it will be better to acknowledge shady behavior and talk about what it's taught them than go on the offensive.

People will focus on the wrongdoing and ignore how the information was obtained every time. And going after the person who exposed the bad behavior looks small-minded and defensive.

People will forgive mistakes, but they have limited tolerance for those who try to explain them away without taking responsibility. Richard Nixon proved that to all of us.

If WikiLeaks does, indeed, release its "treasure trove" of corporate booboos, expect many a corporate player to emerge with their reputation in tatters. Now's a good time to consider the lessons it will teach corporations about behaving badly and head them off at the pass. ■

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