

Building a Crisis Communication Plan for Sports
Organizations: An Analysis of the USA Gymnastics
Sexual Abuse Scandal

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Abstract

Not every organization will experience a crisis, but every organization should plan and prepare for one. Without a crisis plan, an organization can find its image in jeopardy if suitable steps are not followed. This thesis assesses the 2016 USA Gymnastics sexual abuse scandal involving nearly 100 athletes that caused catastrophic damage to the brand's image, and through this analysis, the missteps and corrections within its crisis are broken down through elements of various crisis communication theories. Certain elements of USA Gymnastics such as culture, leadership, and responses will be examined to establish why the result was detrimental, and through theory review, it will be determined how severely crisis communication theories can hurt or help an organization's image. By exploring the models of the situational crisis communication theory, stealing thunder, contingency theory, and image repair theory, this analysis will expose the depths of these frameworks and how their application can contribute to an organization's response and relationship with its stakeholders, the public, and the media.

Introduction

USA Gymnastics serves as the governing body for all gymnastics disciplines, and the apparent success of the organization mainly roots within the elite gymnastics program. Founded in 1963, USAG acts as a member of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). As one of the most watched events in every Olympic Games, the United States gymnastics teams have driven attention to the sport, and as of today, USAG serves around 200,000 members from its affiliated clubs to elite athletes. Over the past few decades, the plethora of gold medals and marketable figures in the sport displayed a winning culture of optimism and opportunity on the surface, but a sexual abuse crisis of epic proportions destroyed the USAG brand and image, as well as the lives of hundreds of individuals who were manipulated and abused by an organization that failed them.

An abusive gymnastics culture began in the United States when Bela and Marta Karolyi immigrated from Romania in 1981, bringing with them coaching tactics of startling high-intensity training, even for youth gymnasts who endured harsh physical and mental demands. Communist bloc countries such as the Soviet Union consistently dominated the world stage in

gymnastics, claiming every Olympic gold medal from 1952 to 1980. But this success came at the cost of the gymnasts being subjected to brutal treatment and intimidation tactics, and they rarely spoke or smiled during competitions. The Karolyis led Nadia Comaneci to the first perfect 10 in gymnastics history and the Olympic gold in 1976. So, U.S. coaches adopted these training methods, which eventually led to major success within the U.S. women's gymnastics teams in the early 2000s onward. The normalized culture of elite gymnastics bred an atmosphere of abuse, intimidation and toxicity, so silence and submissiveness prolonged for decades. Gymnastics commentator and 1984 Olympic gymnast Cathay Johnson described the experience of elite gymnastics as, "It's almost like being a wounded animal. You don't show your weakness. You don't show that you're hurt" (Carr, 2019). Additionally, the team coordinator and selection committee were the only individuals capable of building the U.S. Olympic Team, so athletes did not want to jeopardize their chances by questioning the culture and methods of the elite gymnastics system. These threatening environments instilled obedience and fear into young gymnasts. But USAG Team Medical Coordinator Dr. Larry Nassar did far worse. Under the guise of helping athletes, he instead sexually abused them for decades. The leaders and coaches of USAG failed to create a healthy environment where gymnasts felt comfortable speaking up, so their silence persisted and Nassar's abuse continued.

After the U.S. Olympic Gymnastics Team earned gold in the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in July 2016, IndyStar investigative journalist Marisa Kwiatkowski pursued a story about the lack of reporting policies and resources within USA Gymnastics. Kwiatkowski along with her colleagues Mark Alesia and Tim Evans published "Out of balance: How USA Gymnastics failed to report cases," on Aug. 4, 2016. That article highlighted the cultural issues and tarnished USAG's image. As this story broke all over the country, it uncovered what became known as the

worst sexual abuse scandal in the history of sports and the “darkest stain in U.S. Olympic History” (Carr, 2019).

Just hours after the story reached the public, gymnasts started coming forward about their abusive experience with Nassar, and soon enough, hundreds of women including Olympic champions Simone Biles and Aly Raisman revealed their sexual abuse experiences with Nassar. Nassar faced three counts of criminal sexual conduct with a person under 13 and was released on a \$1 million bond in November 2016. By the time he was arraigned in January 2017, Nassar faced 60 years in prison.

After the sentencing of Larry Nassar, all eyes turned to the USA Gymnastics organization and how they would respond to this crisis and advocate for their athletes. Alesia stated, “Nassar was not our target. Our target was USA Gymnastics” (Cohen & Shenk, 2020). Ten months before the public found out about the abuse, USAG and its president Steve Penny, received reports of this sexual abuse by Olympic hopeful Maggie Nichols. A few days after she reported to Penny and the head of the women’s program, Rhonda Faehn, Penny called Nichol’s mom and demanded they not report to the authorities. Rather, Penny said the family should trust that USAG would handle the matter internally. Instead of abiding by both Texas and Indiana law that required immediately calling the authorities to report this sexual abuse, Penny waited five weeks to report to the FBI, which then launched an internal investigation. After public criticism over the mishandling of sexual abuse reporting and the disregard for athlete safety, Penny stepped down as president in March 2017 with a \$1 million payout.

USAG experienced a decline in stakeholder loyalty and trust. The organization prided itself on medals, success and money that came at the emotional cost of the athletes, made to hide abuse for decades, while the organization protected adults who manipulated and intimidated young women. USAG desperately needed a cultural overhaul. Despite the great need, this did not

immediately occur. Because they did not prepare and implement an effective crisis communication plan, USAG suffered immense reputational and financial damage.

Research Question

What crisis communication theories did USAG apply effectively and also ineffectively, and how can the organization's outcomes guide sports organizations with a standard crisis communication plan based on the applications of these theories?

Theory Analysis

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The situational crisis communication theory provides a framework for organizations to evaluate and respond to a crisis based on their responsibility level. This theory can relate to certain phases of the pre-crisis, but mainly in post-crisis situations. In the article "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory," W Timothy Coombs defines situational crisis communication theory (SCCT):

"SCCT provides a mechanism for anticipating how stakeholders will react to a crisis in terms of the reputational threat posed by the crisis. Moreover, SCCT projects how people will react to the crisis response strategies used to manage the crisis" (Coombs, 2007).

The pre-crisis step within this framework encourages organizations to evaluate their existing internal and external relationships with stakeholders. The established quality of these relationships acts as a significant factor in how or if the reputation of the organization will prevail. To illustrate the linear effect between previous behaviors and relationships to responsibility level, Coombs provides the Prior Relationship Reputation Proposition in the [crisis situation model of SCCT](#) :

“An organization that treated stakeholders badly in the past is attributed greater crisis responsibility and suffers more direct and indirect reputational damage than an organization with a neutral or positive relationship reputation” (Coombs, 2007).

USA Gymnastics upheld positive external relationships with sponsors and the news media, however, internal relationships at the elite level proved shaky and untrustworthy with stakeholders such as coaches and athletes. USAG earned \$34.5 million in revenue in 2016, \$11.68 million higher than the average of the previous five years according to [ProPublica's Non Profit Explorer](#). The marketable success of the brand allowed them to thrive in building awareness and lure customers in an Olympic year. However, for decades, the organization disregarded the abusive internal culture among athletes, coaches and executives. The organization sacrificed internal relationships in favor of earning revenue and building the external image of the brand.

The world of elite gymnastics under USAG fostered fear and mistreatment. The organization accumulated 54 sexual abuse complaints by the time the crisis made headlines, and Penny and his predecessor Robert Colarassi admitted to neglecting a complaint in part to eliminate the risk of ruining a coach's reputation over a potential false report. The decision-makers of the organization sacrificed the safety and well-being of these athletes to protect abusers all over the country including Nassar and other predators who received abuse complaints. USAG mistreated the athletes whose success augmented their brand, and as a result, the reputation of the organization during the post-crisis experienced more severe effects than if its relationship with the athletes embodied trust and loyalty.

During a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in 2021, well-known elite gymnasts including Biles and Raisman testified to how USAG failed them and created a culture where normalized abuse occurred. Biles stated, “To be fair, I blame Larry Nassar, and I also blame an

entire system that enabled and perpetrated his abuse” (Jalonick, 2021). With athletes such as Biles publicly sharing the mistreatment by the organization and highlighting an authoritarian culture of suppressing athletes, USAG’s reputation suffered immensely. If the organization had sought to repair relationships with athletes and instill a healthier culture before the news reports, it might have staved off significant brand damage.

Within the situational crisis communication theory, organizations can fall into three clusters of attribution: victim, accidental and intentional. The significance of damage to an organization’s image relies deeply on which cluster it claims in the post-crisis phase of this framework. USAG fell within the intentional cluster, as it contributed to the harm of stakeholders by violating the law and risking athletes' safety while fully aware of the significant sexual abuse reports. During the investigation, USAG knowingly placed athletes at risk by allowing Nassar to continue attending training camps and competitions.

If an organization shares responsibility for the crisis and leans towards the intentional cluster, the damage to its reputation increases compared to a crisis of victim or accidental nature. Given the internal mistakes--lack of reporting, covering up complaints and fostering a toxic training environment--USAG experienced a more impactful and significant hit to its reputation.

Within the post-crisis phase, SCCT identifies three major response strategies contingent on the elements and severity of the crisis. These responses include--denial, diminish and rebuild--dependent on the cluster. Since USAG fell into the intentional cluster, rebuilding would have best suited the organization’s response strategy. But USAG instead used a diminish response strategy by attempting to lower its responsibility and denying an intention to harm. Although the organization offered \$138 million in compensation to the victims, the overall diminish response strategy represented a critical misstep in judgment. To effectively apply the diminish response strategy, Coombs posits, “Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low

attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), which have no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation” (Coombs, 2007). Two actions of the diminish response strategy include excuse and justification, and USAG demonstrated justification in their post-crisis phase by downplaying and overlooking the severity of the internal issues within the organization. As news reports about Nassar spread, USAG framed itself as proactive by hiring an internal investigator instead of addressing the larger cultural issue. The investigation targeted Nassar and the allegations against him. As such, USAG executives primarily steered attention towards Nassar and away from the underlying, ingrained circumstances that enabled the widespread abuse in the elite gymnastics system. Whenever more information arose that could potentially advance the investigation, the organization privately shut it down to diminish the situation’s severity. For example, after Olympic gymnast Aly Raisman spoke with the investigator about her experience with Nassar, she had not fully come to terms with the magnitude. Following a period of reflection when she attempted to reach the investigator again, she received a message from a USAG official to abstain from speaking about her experience to not compromise the investigation.

Stealing thunder

Stealing thunder serves as a pre-crisis theory with strategies to allow the organization to be the source of the information, and in the article “Stealing Thunder, An Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of crisis information,” Laura Arpan and David Ewoldson define the concept as, “Stealing thunder involves disclosing potentially negative information concerning the self before it is acquired or released by another entity” (Arpan et al., 2005). Stealing thunder poses a significant risk since it requires acknowledgment of an organization’s wrongdoing, but resulting from that transparency comes the potential for public trust in the organization. When organizations jump on the opportunity to take ownership of framing both the message and

relevant facts, the likelihood of false information and accusations from the media and public may decrease. In the article “Stealing thunder as a crisis communication strategy in the digital age,” Sang Lee wrote, “By proactively revealing seemingly negative information, an organization can be perceived as honest and credible. Stakeholders also tend to perceive the crisis as less severe because the self-revelation of negative information can indicate that the organization is confident in its ability to handle the crisis” (Lee, 2020). Stealing thunder does not necessarily constitute apologizing. Rather it emphasizes accountability and proactiveness of the organization in response to a crisis.

Environmental monitoring represents an effective strategy before stealing thunder efforts, as it allows professionals to observe an issue as it gains or loses traction-- on social media and or in public discourse. Lee indicated that environmental monitoring acts as a critical step in controlling the narrative. Stakeholders and public perceptions of the information at hand play a crucial role in the strategies the organization applies to address the issues.

“In the digital age, environmental monitoring can be an important first step in preventing a crisis as well as minimizing its impact. When environmental monitoring detects crisis signs promptly, organizations can engage with stakeholders by taking swift action so that stakeholders can make sense of the negative event” (Lee, 2020).

In the case of USAG, the IndyStar revealed the first instance of Nassar’s abuse to the public. As more victims came forward after reading this article, mounting public pressure and outrage forced USAG to respond to the accusations. In the [entirety of the response](#), USAG provided the IndyStar with its policies and procedures, but no other action step resulted from this response. On the same day the IndyStar published its article, Penny released a statement:

“Addressing issues of sexual misconduct has been important to USA Gymnastics for many years, and the organization is committed to promoting a safe environment for its athletes.

We find it appalling that anyone would exploit a young athlete or child in this manner and recognize the effect this behavior can have on a person's life. USA Gymnastics has been proactive in helping to educate the gymnastics community over the years and will continue to take every punitive action available within our jurisdiction, and cooperate fully with law enforcement" (Koven, 2016).

USAG released this statement 414 days after the first report of Nassar's sexual abuse became known by Nichols and after investigators examined the organization. The public discovered that the organization hid this information for more than a year. Since USAG did not directly release the sexual abuse reports, public distrust increased and USAG experienced a severe image downfall. USAG failed to acknowledge its wrongdoing and implement corrective action immediately. Without utilizing the stealing thunder strategy, the organization opened itself up to negative claims by both the public and the media.

Contingency theory

The contingency theory provides a framework that does not fit a predetermined model, rather, the flexibility of this framework encourages an organization to rely on leadership and evaluate the most optimal stance and response. The two stances of accommodation and advocacy comprise this post-crisis theory. To determine which stance to take, Augustine Pang and Glen Cameron outline the predisposing variables in their research article "Conflict Positioning in Crisis Communication: Impact of Antecedent Conditions on Negotiation" which include, "The size of the organization, corporate culture, business exposure, PR to dominant coalition, dominant coalition enlightenment, individual characteristics of key personnel, like members of the crisis management team" (Mazzei et al., 2022). Rather than applying the accommodative stance by taking accountability and accepting public disagreement to benefit stakeholders, USAG took the advocacy stance by concealing and downplaying information to protect itself.

Within the advocacy route, organizations can apply a multitude of responses that include attacking the accuser, denial, evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness. USAG applied many of these tactics in an attempt to protect their image. Instead of releasing the accounts of sexual abuse reports to stakeholders, Penny and USAG kept the investigation and its findings secretive for more than a year. This allowed the organization to reduce offensiveness of the situation and evade responsibility from systemic issues. But only temporarily. By the time the IndyStar published the report in 2016, Penny and other USAG officials had worked on the private investigation for a year. With Nassar at the forefront of the investigation, all public attention steered toward him and shifted away from the culture that enabled the abuse.

To effectively apply the contingency theory to benefit the stakeholders, USAG needed strong and willing leadership to take accountability and work to rebuild the relationships. Instead, USAG lacked a leader willing to take responsibility and apologize on behalf of the organization. The contingency theory indicates that task-oriented and relationship-oriented leaders play a significant role in the post-crisis. Task-oriented leaders focus on the goals and targets of the organization while relationship-oriented leaders work to build the organization's morale and promote strong relationships. USAG's leadership did not represent either of these orientations. Rather, Penny neither attempted to provide resources to victims nor did he issue a statement apologizing to them for the trauma they endured. Instead, after Penny stepped down from his role as president, he pleaded the Fifth Amendment in court and refused to accept responsibility for what occurred under his tenure. At the Senate Commerce subcommittee meeting in 2018, Senator Richard Blumenthal asked Penny, "Don't you feel you have a responsibility to the athletes who are here today and to others around the country, more than 260 of them, to be more forthcoming?" (Rogin, 2018). After refusing to answer this question, Blumenthal excused him from the courtroom.

With no strong leader actively working to rebuild the organization, brand damage proliferated until Li Li Leung took on the role of president in 2019. Leung embodied a strong leader who applied the contingency theory in the post-crisis period by taking a more accommodative stance through mortification and corrective action. Leung apologized to the victims, and she did not hesitate to implement sweeping new policies, training, and committees to advocate for athletes and victims. With mortification comes corrective action, and Leung exemplified a task-oriented leader who acknowledged the wrongdoings of USAG and set eyes on rebuilding relationships and fixing mistakes. Leung adopted the Path-Goal theory of the contingency theory of leadership. In the article “History of Managerial Thought: A Brief Overview,” Richard J. Moniz Jr wrote, “The basic premise of Path–Goal Theory (House 1996) is that the leader's most important function is to enhance subordinate motivation by clarifying the paths to the subordinate's goals and making it easier for the subordinate to traverse those paths” (Moniz, 2010). Leung shouldered the responsibility of rebranding and rebuilding, and through her leadership, she eliminated the circumstances within the organization that permitted a crisis to develop. With her clear path of corrective action for athlete advocacy and proper coach training, she steered USAG into a clearer and more positive path. Moniz wrote, “Path-goal theory predicts (with moderate to good empirical support) that leader structuring and direction will be most helpful and have their most positive effects when subordinates lack ability or are confronted with situations of task demand or complexity beyond their capability” (Moniz, 2010).

Image Repair Theory

Within the last phase of a crisis, image repair theory can allow an organization to restore its image to the public via certain response and rebuild techniques. Denial, evading responsibility, mortification, reducing offensiveness and corrective action serve as the main strategies of image repair theory. The theory aims to create and maintain a positive reputation

post-crisis. This framework holds similar strategies as the contingency theory, but rather than evaluating situational factors in the response, image repair provides an objective framework with the sole intention of rebuilding a positive public image and restoring trusting relationships with stakeholders. Sans a positive public image, corporations face difficulty operating and providing for stakeholders. Organizations should prioritize strategic methods to repair their image in the post-crisis phase. Sifan Chen and Yuxue Chi emphasize the importance of applying this theory in the article “Study on the image restoration strategies and effects on corporations in crisis situations based on text mining”

“In the 1990s, American scholar William L. Benoit proposed the image restoration theory, holding the reputation of a corporate is the most important asset and the reputation or public image of a corporate should be maintained from a strategic height,” (Chen et al., 2023).

After USAG experienced its crisis, the organization did not strategically rebuild its image sufficiently in the early stages. Thus, uncertainty permeated the organization. USAG filed for bankruptcy, lost sponsorships, and received backlash from stakeholders because of its mishandling of the crisis. At the same time, the public perception of the organization turned negative and persisted.

After Penny stepped down and USAG faced the height of negative public perception, the organization attempted to rebuild too quickly. The organization also failed to address the needs of the stakeholders and acknowledge the cultural issues it fostered. USAG cycled through three CEOs in less than two years. Without a leader or revised executive team, the lack of structure created a barrier to image repair. Perry, the first CEO to take the position after Penny, attempted to repair USAG’s image by apologizing for wrongdoing and promising to create change. But her words promised more than her actions delivered, and the public and news media criticized her for failing to deliver the measures she promised. To take corrective action and preventive

measures, Perry needed to execute her plans as the CEO, but her lack of urgency to publicize a new vision and reconstructed image to the public delayed the organization's sustained image repair efforts. In the IndyStar article “USA Gymnastics CEO forced out after nine months marked by chaos, lack of tangible action,” Nancy Armour and Rachel Axon wrote:

“But the PR nightmare was just the latest for USA Gymnastics under Perry, whose inconsistency in personnel decisions, inability to articulate a clear vision for the future and low public profile caused chaos for an organization looking for bold leadership. USA Gymnastics has lost all of its key sponsors, and its national championships last month were held without a title sponsor, almost unheard of for one of the marquee Olympic sports in the United States” (Axon, 2018).

Leung became the first leader of the organization who strategically carried out the image repair theory, and as a result, completely rebuilt the mission, values and brand. Through corrective action techniques such as creating committee spots for Nassar victims, revising and routinely updating policies, and enforcing quality coach and medical professional training, Leung slowly rebuilt the relationships with the stakeholders and public. When reporters asked Biles about how her relationship has evolved with the organization, Biles said, “I think it’s changed because a lot of the people in there have changed,” she said. “They have stepped up to the role. They’ve done the work. They put in the work” (Graves, 2024). The new national team coordinator role, once spearheaded by Marta Karolyi, devolved to three individuals in charge. By prioritizing mental health, well-being and athlete longevity, USAG turned around the public perception that now views the organization as one of uplifting and positive outcomes that places athletes before financial success and medals.

Recommended Actions for USAG: Sports Organizations in Crisis

Within the pre-crisis moments, USAG should have evaluated factors within and outside its control. The organization could not control the efforts of an outside investigation, but it could control how to guide stakeholders through the crisis. Sports organizations could offer concessions to the athletes/others impacted to help ease recovery and build goodwill to counter negative experiences while in the employ of the organization. Not only does this strategy demonstrate a priority for healing and well-being, but it can also encourage athletes to continue trusting and building reliance in the organization. A few examples of concession tactics include providing reporting hotlines and call centers along with offering free therapy sessions for those affected. If athletes have a safe, non-public space to unpack their trauma and share their feelings, it may mitigate public outbursts of athletes and/or stakeholders. If sports organizations offer these resources to the stakeholders promptly, this will aid in the stabilization and restoration of internal relationships for the long term. The Prior Relationship Reputation Proposition indicates that if the organization treated stakeholders well in the past, their reputation would not suffer as significantly. If USAG offered concessions to athletes after the investigation started and before the facts became public, the athletes could have coped in a healthier manner and done so via USAG's assistance.

Instead of reducing offensiveness and evading responsibility, USAG should have applied the post-crisis SCCT rebuild response strategy earlier. Before the trial took place in 2018, Penny and the executives should have issued a statement of apology taking responsibility for the role culture played in Nassar's abuse. This statement should have contained descriptions of the toxic environment in elite gymnastics that allowed Nassar to continue sexually abusing gymnasts over the years-long spans and corrective actions USAG would implement to prevent future crises. Sports organizations should always prepare a general statement that includes the appropriate elements of corrective action and mortification. The statement should reach all individuals

affected, as well as stakeholders and the public. Additionally, the statement should contain current and future steps to address the issues including punishments for those in the wrong, compensation for victims, and allowing victims to opt out if they wish. For example, the National Women's Soccer League applied the rebuild response strategy by canceling a week of their games and allowing athletes to stop mid-play to protest the coaching abuse they played under for years. This action demonstrated the NWSL's support of athletes' concerns and demands for change. And change took place – the league forced out problem coaches, updated its policies and better advocated for its players. By showcasing support, stakeholders can reestablish trust with the organization. USAG and other sports organizations could instead display constructivism and the championing of athletes in post-crisis uncertainty.

When USA Gymnastics received the first report of Larry Nassar on June 17th, 2015, the PR team and executives should have contacted the athletes and their families to notify them of the danger potentially posed by Nassar. This action would demonstrate an organization prioritizes athlete safety along with fostering a trusting relationship. Sports organizations and their executives should provide information to the stakeholders directly and source information rather than discovering the truth from news media outlets. This proactive strategy steals thunder from other organizations, primarily news outlets, that might misrepresent or otherwise contort facts that showcase negative outcomes within an organization. By stealing thunder, sports organizations can better control the situation and frame the crisis themselves.

USAG could have used the accommodative stance of the contingency theory to protect stakeholders and adjust company operations, management and conditions. USAG leaders knew this scandal might threaten the core of the brand and image, and in the article “Internal crisis communication strategies: Contingency factors determining an accommodative approach,” Alessandra Mazzei wrote, “The higher the risk of reputational damage to the organization, the

more organizations adopt an internal crisis communication accommodative approach to sustain the organizational reputation in the eyes of employees” (Mazzei et al., 2022). To execute this, USAG needed to alter the methods of operation within the company so appropriate individuals could shift their priorities to managing the crisis. However, since Penny received the abuse allegations before the Olympic year when the organization typically makes its most significant revenue, leadership kept the allegations private from both the internal and external publics.

A sports organization and its executive board of members should temporarily cease routine tasks to focus on the crisis. In the meantime, an interim board of directors can provide the day-to-day management. If stakeholders and the public realize that the decision-makers prioritize correcting the crisis and focus on the athletes rather than the brand image, it can lead to a more trusting perception of the organization. And that action can lessen the damage to the brand. Sports organizations must be willing to shift operations to protect stakeholders. This willingness to shift can signify corrective action standpoints that better consider the brand and its relationships to stakeholders’ interests and protection.

The image repair strategies play a major role in the stability and future of organizations after a crisis. USAG should have applied the corrective action technique sooner than it did. Because they did not seek or direct change, they filed for bankruptcy and teetered on the brink of decertification as a sports governing body. Although Leung implemented many effective changes in 2021, the organization should have acted sooner after the investigation concluded. Through this proactive method, it could have established better procedures to improve its culture, policies and practices. For example, after USA Swimming received multiple reports and accusations about coaches sexually abusing athletes, it received harsh backlash from the public for covering up the abuse. In response to these accusations in 2010, USA Swimming proposed a seven-point action plan to protect athletes, implement better screenings for coaches and improve their sexual

abuse reporting system. Alongside this plan, the organization created its own SafeSport program a few years later to provide abuse prevention training to coaches and parents that address any misconduct within coaching. The organization also collaborated with other major corporations such as the National Child Protection Training Center and the National Child Welfare League, and together, took corrective action steps that moved USA Swimming in a positive direction. Other sports organizations can adopt these techniques by working with a PR firm and crisis communication experts to incorporate an action plan. Officials from the organization can revise their policies and procedures and launch a plan to provide resources and support to victims. By taking the appropriate action steps, organizations can establish cohesive rebuilding strategies by learning from their mistakes and initiating preconceived step-by-step action plans to prevent future crises.

Conclusion

The sexual abuse scandal that USAG turned a blind eye to not only damaged the relationships with stakeholders but significantly tarnished the brand. The internal culture of fear and manipulation enabled decades of prolonged abuse from Nassar. Through its missteps and misjudgments of appropriate actions, USAG neglected crucial elements of effective crisis response and rebuild strategies. These four crisis communication theories allow organizations to evaluate crisis severity and determine methods of response aligned with internal and external factors. By implementing action steps and strategies from the theory breakdown, sports organizations should follow a step-by-step action plan to minimize its reputational harm. Although not every organization will experience a crisis of USAG's magnitude, they should nevertheless implement plans and actions to address one.

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