CRISIS COMMUNICATION BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF CASES IN THE CROATIAN MOUNTAIN RESCUE SERVICE

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ABSTRACT: *Given the current global situation encompassing climate change, natural disasters, war threats, terrorism, and many other hazards, it is almost certain to conclude that we are living in times of crisis. Therefore, it is crucial that we actively address these challenges and do not allow them to dominate us. Crisis management discipline becomes increasingly important in such circumstances. This discipline enables organizations and individuals to effectively manage crisis situations by recognizing risks, planning responses, and acting quickly to mitigate consequences. Additionally, crisis management aims to prevent or reduce the negative impacts of a crisis, thereby protecting the organization, its partners, and the industry from harm. A crucial component of this is crisis communication.*

The importance of crisis communication is best seen in the saying that a crisis is not what happened but how the public perceives what happened. In a narrow sense, crisis communication involves the exchange of information, opinions, attitudes, and even emotions before, during, and after a crisis. In a broader sense, it is defined as the collection, processing, and dissemination of necessary information to deal with a crisis. Without effective crisis communication, crisis management can be significantly hindered, as communication plays a crucial role in managing the perception of external stakeholders, media, employees, and the public during crisis situations. Therefore, crisis communication is integrated into all phases of crisis management to ensure effective crisis management.

In order for crisis communication to be adequate, certain principles have been recognized, according to Coombs (2007): 1) Take control and communicate clearly; 2) Present information unambiguously, clearly, and vividly; 3) Approach the media calmly and confidently; 4) Inform all potential spokespersons with the most up-to-date information about the crisis and the key messages the organization is trying to convey; 5) Inform the internal audience/employees about the crisis and crisis action; 6) Sincerely show concern for the newly arising problem and its consequences, as well as for the people affected by it.

This paper analyzes two cases of crisis communication using the example of the Croatian Mountain Rescue Service according to the mentioned principles. The purpose of the analysis using the case study method is to highlight good and bad examples and to provide conclusions

and recommendations for future crisis communication, both for the Croatian Mountain Rescue Service and related organizations.

KEYWORDS*: crisis communication, crisis management, protocol, HGSS*

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern world is facing increasingly frequent and complex threats. As a result, crisis management has become an indispensable part of every organization's strategy, essential for maintaining its stability, reputation, and long-term success. Crisis management, as a specialized field, is responsible for the timely identification of potential crises, their prevention, and rapid and efficient action when a crisis occurs. Mitroff and Anagnos (2005) emphasize that the goal of crisis management is to reduce the negative effects of a crisis on the organization and its stakeholders, and successful crisis management can protect not only the organization but also the broader community and the industry in which it operates.

Organizations that excel in crisis management not only manage to minimize damage but can also gain significant competitive advantage. According to experts, crisis management involves systematic and planned activities that adapt to each phase of a crisis, from prevention to recovery, and include a wide range of stakeholders within the organization. The effectiveness of this process often depends on applying key management principles such as swift action, protection of people, and open communication. Effective communication during crises can significantly reduce damage, preserve the organization's reputation, and enable faster recovery after the crisis. Given that every crisis also represents an information crisis, the inability to manage that information often leads to a loss of control over the entire crisis (Crandall et al., 2014).

These principles form the foundation of successful crisis management, enabling organizations to better prepare for future challenges and ensure business continuity. This paper analyzes the effectiveness of the existing communication system of the Croatian Mountain Rescue Service (HGSS) and the need for crisis communication protocols. Through the analysis of two case studies, the paper addresses the adequacy of communication in crisis situations and the complexity of required protocols for nonprofit organizations.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

This paper analyzes two cases of crisis communication using the example of HGSS. The aim of the analysis, employing the case study method, is to identify good and bad practices and to provide conclusions and recommendations for future crisis communication, both for HGSS and for similar organizations. The basic methods used for gathering and processing information included the analysis of published articles as well as a review of domestic and international literature.

3. CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Crisis communication is one of the key elements of successful crisis management, as it encompasses the exchange of information, opinions, attitudes, and even emotions before, during, and after a crisis. In a broader sense, crisis communication refers to the process of collecting, processing, and distributing the information necessary for effectively dealing with a crisis. As an integral part of crisis management, crisis communication follows the main phases of crisis management: the pre-crisis phase, the crisis response phase, and the post-crisis phase.

In the pre-crisis phase, crisis communication focuses on preventing potential crisis situations. This includes identifying potential risks, developing crisis plans, training the crisis team, and creating clear communication strategies.

When a crisis occurs, crisis communication becomes crucial for mitigating its consequences. In this phase, additional information is gathered, crisis measures are implemented, and relevant information is quickly and accurately conveyed to the public. The speed and accuracy of communication are essential because timely information not only reduces panic but also enables better understanding of the situation. In the context of crisis management, leaders must be able to make quick but crucial decisions based on information coming from various sources (Waugh & Streib, 2006). This is especially important because crisis managers often need to process data from different institutions that use specific jargon (Derthick, 2007). As a result, they must not only quickly identify key information but also communicate it effectively to other participants to achieve efficient coordination. Furthermore, in this phase, the role of the media becomes extremely important in reducing uncertainty, fear, and anxiety among stakeholders (Tomić & Jugo, 2021). Timely and accurate information delivered through the media can significantly contribute to understanding the crisis, preventing panic, and enabling an organized response. Additionally, if an organization has established good relationships with

the media or their representatives, it will be easier to disseminate its messages and ensure that the media verify the accuracy of information before publication (Argenti, 2009). This increases public trust and reduces the risk of spreading misinformation, further helping leaders make quick and correct decisions based on available data (Waugh & Streib, 2006). Good relationships with the media contribute to greater transparency, which, as Rawlins (2009) points out, is a prerequisite for trust, a crucial element of effective crisis management. Transparency allows the media to deliver accurate and timely information, reducing the risk of misinformation and helping the public gain trust in the organization during crises. Trust, in turn, helps the organization communicate more easily with stakeholders, as clearly communicated and verified information aids in better understanding the situation and facilitates the making of key decisions (Coombs, 2012).

After the crisis has passed, in the post-crisis phase, crisis communication involves analyzing the actions taken, communicating with stakeholders about the outcomes and any necessary changes, and sending additional messages if needed. This phase also includes evaluating the effectiveness of the crisis response, analyzing the impact of the crisis on the organization, and assessing the damage caused.

Effective communication is essential in all phases of a crisis, with Coombs (2007) emphasizing the following principles in particular:

- **Taking control and clear communication:** The organization must actively lead communication, clearly and promptly presenting information, and avoiding silence.
- **Precise and simple information delivery:** Information should be presented in a way that is clear and easy to understand, without using complex technical language.
- **Calm and confident media presence:** Organization representatives should appear calm and confident, maintaining eye contact and speaking clearly to leave a positive impression.
- **Updating all spokespersons:** All spokespersons should be well-informed about the current situation and the key messages the organization wants to convey, ensuring consistent communication.
- **Informing internal audiences and employees:** It is important that employees are aware of the crisis situation and planned steps so that they can react appropriately and relay information further.
- **Sincerely expressing concern:** The organization should demonstrate genuine concern for those affected by the crisis, showing empathy and responsibility for the situation.

Failure to adhere to these principles can lead to negative media publicity, undermine trust among key stakeholders, and create a perception of incompetence or irresponsibility within the organization.

The absence of crisis management can damage an organization's reputation. In such cases, there are a range of strategies that can be applied to restore that reputation. Reputation preservation strategies include various approaches such as attacking accusers, denying the crisis, blaming external factors, offering excuses, justifying actions, reminding stakeholders of past good deeds, ingratiating behavior, compensating victims, and issuing apologies. Apologies are particularly important, as they involve fully admitting mistakes, taking responsibility, expressing regret, and implementing corrective measures (Coombs, 2007; Hearit, 2005).

In addition to these strategies, other methods such as admitting mistakes, seeking legal assistance, remaining silent, withdrawing, attacking, and finding broader reasons for the crisis can be used to preserve reputation. It is important to remember that while an organization's reputation takes a long time to build, it can be quickly lost, making careful and thoughtful crisis communication crucial for maintaining trust and credibility.

4. THE EARTHQUAKES IN BANOVINA IN 2020 AND THE RESPONSE OF HGSS

After the earthquake in Zagreb on March 22, 2020, the Croatian Mountain Rescue Service (HGSS) established procedures for such situations, which proved useful during the Banovina earthquakes in December of the same year. The earthquake in Petrinja on December 28, with a magnitude of 5.0, did not cause any human casualties but resulted in significant material damage, prompting a swift response from civil protection services. Unfortunately, the following day, an even stronger earthquake with a magnitude of 6.2 struck near Petrinja, causing greater destruction and loss of life, particularly in the Sisak-Moslavina County.

After the December 28, 2020, earthquake, HGSS responded immediately, with their activity intensifying following the stronger earthquake on December 29. All available resources were mobilized, a command center was established in Petrinja, and 190 members were engaged in rapid searches of affected settlements. HGSS surveyed 100 villages within 24 hours, rescuing those in need and providing assistance. Their tasks included searching for people trapped under debris, transporting goods, repairing damages, conducting drone reconnaissance, and evacuating cultural assets. The HGSS's operations continued intensively until early February 2021.
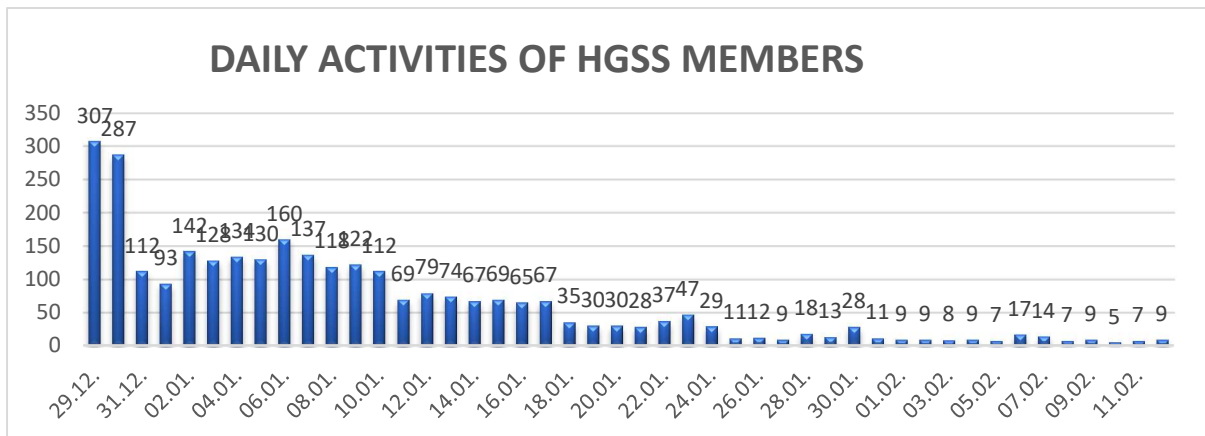

Figure 1. Overview of the daily activities of HGSS members from December 29, 2020, to February 12, 2021.

Source: HGSS Operations Analysis

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF HGSS COMMUNICATION

The characteristics of HGSS communication are speed, transparency, impartiality, and a frequent educational nature. Due to their role, communication is often reactive, but their educational and warning messages are the most recognizable. They frequently convey warnings and educate the public via social media. As a nonprofit organization with volunteers working for the public good, HGSS enjoys a high level of public trust. Their accessibility and openness to the media, along with successful collaboration with media outlets, further strengthen their reputation.

HGSS's crisis communication during the Banovina earthquakes was distinct compared to other organizations. HGSS did not have a manual or guidelines for crisis communication, which forced them to adapt their approach to the situation on the ground. Upon arrival at the disaster site, they established a command center and appointed a communication team led by the HGSS Chief. The team also included the Chief of the Information and Analytics Commission and another member of the Commission. Their tasks included gathering information, monitoring the media and social networks, and coordinating messages.

Commission members also took over media communication, while the Chief served as the main spokesperson. All members of the crisis communication team had experience in rescue operations, which allowed them to confidently make decisions and relay information. The messages sent out were accurate and verified, and they were regularly published on HGSS's social media platforms.

The goals of HGSS's crisis communication were to calm the situation through timely information, prevent misinformation, and position HGSS as a key service in the civil protection system. In the two weeks following the earthquakes, HGSS was mentioned 161 times on major news portals, with a total of 951 mentions across all portals. Although 84 out of the 161 mentions had a negative tone, none were negative towards HGSS.

The greatest reach was achieved by a story about the K9 team that found a person trapped under debris, further confirming HGSS's capabilities. This story was repeatedly highlighted in the media, which further solidified HGSS's reputation.

Figure 2. An article with a reach of 589,688 people, published on December 31, 2020.
Source:https://zadovoljna.dnevnik.hr/clanak/htjeli-su-ga-uspavati-ali-kruno-je-vjerovao-u-
njega-draco-je-spasio-zenu-zatrpanu-u-potresu---634265.html

Figure 3. K9 team in action, clear message from HGSS, published on December 29, 2020. Source:https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/hgss-dosad-spasio-sest-osoba-ne-prekidaju-akciju-ni-tijekom-noci/

HGSS's swift response and coordination with the media helped prevent the spread of misinformation and ensured that the public received accurate information about the situation on the ground.

In accordance with the crisis communication principles identified by Coombs (2007), HGSS took control of the situation and actively communicated with the public. The information provided was clear and precise, and confident media appearances further ensured that messages were properly conveyed. All relevant parties were informed about the crisis situation, and internal communication prevented potential disagreements within the team.

6. DAMAGED REPUTATION OF HGSS

In August 2019, the reputation of HGSS was seriously compromised due to an incident involving HGSS member Matko Škalamera, who was accused of assaulting a citizen, Dobrivoje Arsić, allegedly motivated by national intolerance. The conflict arose from a misunderstanding over a parking space, and the case attracted media attention after the Serbian National Council filed a complaint. The incident placed HGSS and its member under critical public scrutiny, despite the high ethical and moral standards that are central to HGSS's operations.

Figure 4. SNV Files Criminal Complaint.

Source: https://narod.hr/hrvatska/kaznenu-prijavu-protiv-skalamere-podnijelo-je-srpsko-narodno-vijece

The first news about the incident appeared in the media on August 23, 2019, when the assault was still reported as an act by an unknown perpetrator. The article strongly emphasized that it was a hate crime and violence against a national minority. This interpretation further attracted media and public attention.

It was not until August 26, 2019, that it was revealed that the accused HGSS member from Rijeka, Matko Škalamera, was the suspect. The name of the accused and his connection to HGSS were first published in the media that morning, specifically at 07:28 on the Novosti portal.

Figure 5. First Publication Naming the Accused and Mentioning HGSS Membership.
Source: https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/crna-kronika/sok-u-rijeci-za-napad-na-viskovu-osumnjicen-jedan-od-najpoznatijih-hrvatskih-spasioca/

The potential crisis for HGSS began with the publication of the article shown in Figure 12. At the time the article was published, HGSS leadership was unaware of the situation and had not established a protocol for crisis communication in similar cases. The article highlighted the identity of the accused and linked him with HGSS, creating an immediate association between the organization and the actions of the accused, without additional context or explanation.

An additional issue arose because HGSS leadership, including the Chief and the Chief of the Information and Analytics Commission, was unavailable for comment until late morning on August 26, 2019. Since the first hours of crisis communication are crucial for an appropriate response and information management, the delay in response led to problems and allowed the media and the public to speculate and conjecture.

The lack of timely information from authorized personnel forced journalists to seek comments from former HGSS Chief Vinko Prizmić. Although he was not familiar with the details of the case, Prizmić made a statement that was reported in the media and triggered further negative reactions towards HGSS.

Figure 6. First Response from HGSS by Former Chief.

Source: https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/nedjelo-rijeckog-spasioca-zgranulo-
njegove-kolege-njegovi-su-postupci-nespojivi-sa-sluzbom-gss-a/

Less than three hours after the identity of the accused HGSS member was made public, the first response from HGSS to the public elicited predominantly negative reactions in Rijeka. Figure 7 shows how HGSS's support for M. Škalamera was called into question, nearly implicating him in wrongdoing, even though official statements did not confirm such claims.

Međutim, posebno žaloste izjave Škalamerinih kolega. Premda su mu tijekom ponedjeljka mnogi javno odaslali poruke podrške, dugogodišnji čelnik Hrvatske gorske službe spašavanja Vinko Prizmić kaže: «Govorim u svoje ime, ali se ograđujem od postupaka kolege Škalamere. Znam ga kroz godine zajedničkog rada, kvalitetan je alpinist, ali njegovi su postupci nespojivi sa službom GSS-a», pritom ne dvojeći uopće je li njegov kolega uistinu počinio to što mu stavljaju na teret. Kako će budući volonteri, neumorni aktivisti, spašavatelji ljudskih života koji bez kune naknade riskiraju svoje živote uopće pristupiti HGSS-u kada njihov najugledniji član u kritičnim trenucima ne staje iza svojega kolege?

Figure 7. Reaction from Local Media in Rijeka.

Source: https://www.fiuman.hr/skalamera-je-bio-spreman-pomoci-svima-medijski-linc-nije-zasluzio

The stance presented in the article from Figure 7 was conveyed by all major media outlets, leading to numerous negative reactions towards HGSS, particularly from Rijeka. The first official statement from HGSS came only after Vinko Prizmić's response and the negative sentiment that had already developed. In the meantime, HGSS gathered relevant information, coordinated with the Rijeka station leadership, and decided that only the HGSS Chief and the Chief of the Information and Analytics Commission would address the media. The first official response, released in the afternoon of August 26, 2019, was too late to correct the negative impression that had already taken hold, especially on social media. HGSS did not engage in debates but issued a statement on their social media channels in response to the attacks.

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Zagreb, 26. kolovoza 2019. godine

PRIOPĆENJE ZA JAVNOST

Povodom medijskih napisa koji se tiču našeg člana želimo informirati javnost da je:

Hrvatska gorska služba spašavanja nacionalna, dobrovoljna, stručna, humanitarna i nestranačka udruga javnog značaja, čiji su osnovni ciljevi sprječavanje nesreća, spašavanje i pružanje prve medicinske pomoći u planini i na drugim nepristupačnim područjima i u izvanrednim okolnostima kod kojih pri spašavanju i pružanju prve pomoći treba upotrijebiti tehničku opremu za spašavanje u planinama u svrhu očuvanja ljudskog života, zdravlja i imovine.

Stoga je rasna, spolna, religijska, nacionalna i bilo kakva druga netrpeljivost nespojiva s misijom i vizijom Hrvatske gorske službe spašavanja. Volonteri HGSS-a pa tako i naš član Matko Škalamera, nebrojeno su puta pokazali da svoje aktivnosti obavljaju izrazito profesionalno, odgovorno i humano. Matko Škalamera dugogodišnji je spašavatelj i svoje je znanje, motiv i moral nebrojeno puta pokazao kako u Hrvatskoj tako i širom svijeta.

HGSS ne može i ne želi prejudicirati ičiju krivnju niti se dovoditi u vezu sa spomenutim slučajem. Osuđujemo svako nasilje bez obzira tko ga, kada i gdje počinio. Detalje samog slučaja ne možemo komentirati do okončanja postupka.

Josip Granić, pročelnik

Figure 8. Press Release Sent to All Media. Source: HGSS
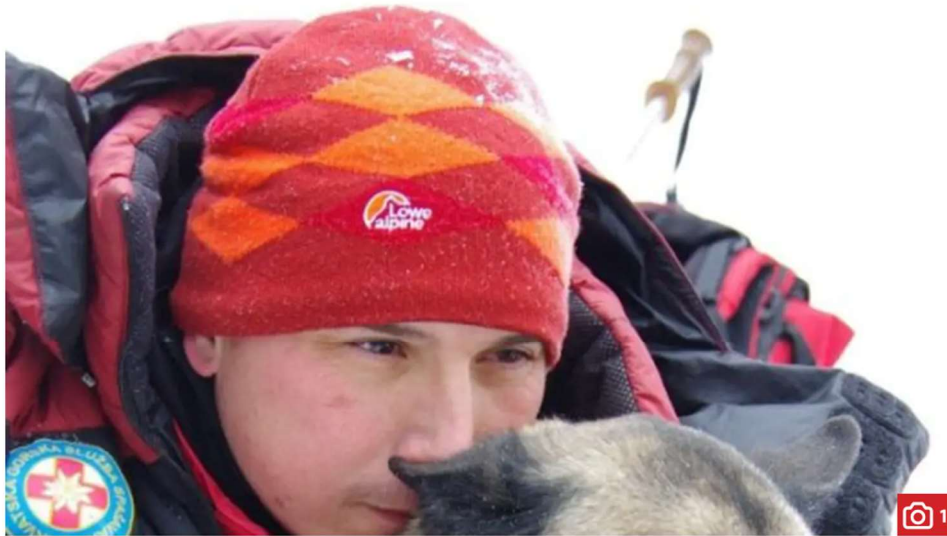
Figure 9. Media Headline After HGSS Press Release.

Source: 24sata.hr

After the release of the press statement, HGSS did not continue with media appearances, instead focusing on internal communication and coordination within the organization. Over time, as attention shifted to the act and reasons behind M. Škalamera's detention, the situation began to calm. By the evening of August 27, 2019, the situation had improved, with HGSS being recognized as a supporter of M. Škalamera while distancing itself from any negative actions.

The case concluded with a court proceeding, which was withdrawn at the request of the plaintiff, D. Arsić, allowing M. Škalamera to return to work after being temporarily removed.

The analysis of the case revealed the following shortcomings and successes in HGSS's crisis communication:

1. Untimely Response: The first official response was delayed and ineffective, impacting HGSS's reputation and credibility.
2. Lack of Crisis Team: A crisis team had not been pre-formed, complicating a swift and coordinated response.
3. Limited Information: Due to the nature of the allegations, it was difficult to gather and convey all relevant information to the public.
4. Lack of Scenarios: No scenario had been prepared for a situation where HGSS was implicated.
5. Key Messages: Key messages were prepared and conveyed through a press release.
6. Spokespersons: Two individuals were designated for media interactions, including the HGSS chief.
7. Internal Communication: Ongoing internal communication was maintained.
8. Media Notifications: Media were informed via a press release, but HGSS remained available for further inquiries.

According to Coombs' (2007) crisis communication principles, the following deficiencies were noted:

1. Control and Communication: HGSS did not promptly take control and communicate, creating an impression of silence.
2. Clear Presentation of Information: Not all information was available for clear presentation.
3. Confidence in Media: There was a lack of media appearances that could have improved HGSS's image.
4. Informing Spokespersons: Spokespersons were aware of key messages.
5. Informing Employees: Employees were informed, but initial reactions were inconsistent.
6. Concern: Concern for the situation was expressed internally but not publicly.
7. Support for Victims: It was not possible to clearly identify victims in this case.

The example shows that HGSS was not prepared for a reputation crisis but managed to stabilize the situation within less than 24 hours. After the analysis, it was decided to improve crisis communication and media relations, including member education, especially for those appearing in the media. There was also a need established for developing protocols and educating members on crisis communication.

7. CONCLUSION

Crises are inevitable and can vary in type and intensity. While complete preparation for all crisis situations is not possible, good preparation can reduce negative consequences and recovery time.

The analysis of two examples of HGSS crisis communication—response to a natural disaster and a reputational threat—reveals the following:

1. **Natural Disaster:** HGSS effectively communicated its expertise and actions, particularly during the Banovina earthquake in 2020. In this case, the crisis was managed more smoothly because the organization communicated clearly and focused on its professional activities, which helped maintain its reputation.

2. **Reputational Threat:** The Rijeka case demonstrates how HGSS could have better managed the crisis. Delayed and inadequate responses resulted in negative perceptions, although the situation improved later. Timely and precise communication could have mitigated damage to the organization's reputation.

The analysis highlights the need for establishing formal crisis communication protocols. Recommendations for improving crisis communication at HGSS include:

1. **Before a Crisis:**
   o Form a crisis communication team.
   o Prepare a communication list of team members.
   o Conduct additional training for team members.

2. **Identifying a Potential Crisis:**
   o Identify types of crises such as operational errors, fatal accidents, unethical behavior, major incidents, and disasters.
   o Ensure collection and analysis of information relevant to the crisis situation.

3. **During a Crisis:**
   o Gather and analyze accurate information.
   o Prepare key messages and develop a strategy.
   o Ensure on-the-ground presence, expertise, and openness in communication.
   o Make quick decisions and act promptly.
   o Have quality representatives for media appearances who will show empathy and communicate clearly.
   o Monitor information on social media and be accessible to the media.

4. **After the Crisis:**

- Analyze HGSS's actions and communication during the crisis.
- Develop recommendations for improving future crisis communications.

These recommendations provide a foundation for developing a detailed crisis communication protocol, enabling HGSS to manage crises more effectively and maintain its reputation.

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