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Crisis Comms by the Steelers



Mark O'Keefe

Senior Writer | 6 Pulitzer Nominations | C-Suite Speechwriting
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January 20, 2017

Coach Mike Tomlin opened a Pittsburgh Steelers news conference Tuesday with blunt, no-nonsense talk. *"I'll start with the elephant in the room," Tomlin said. "I want to talk to you about the postgame video."*

I was so struck by Tomlin's subsequent [statement](#) I read it out loud to a group of crisis communications professionals gathered around a table on

the 43rd floor of a hotel in Shanghai, China, this week. We were planning strategy in the unlikely event a crisis hit the U.S. dairy industry in one of our largest and most sensitive export markets.

What would we do? How would we do it? If bad news spread on social media, how would we counter it? Those are questions crisis communications strategists try to answer before they're in the crisis.

I don't know if Tomlin planned for a scenario like this. But he performed admirably in the clutch, diffusing what could have been a week-long story distracting his organization before its AFC Championship playoff game. Our group of communication strategists agreed there are lessons here for other leaders finding themselves in a crisis, whatever their industry.

This was not a life-and-death issue like some corporate crises are. It was video shot by wide receiver Antonio Brown, who preens in front of the camera, watching the numbers on his live audience grow. You can hear Tomlin addressing his team in the background with the type of foul language often heard in locker rooms, as Brown

Antonio Brown Facebook Live



It doesn't appear Brown was trying to damage his team. He later apologized. But the easy-to-use [Facebook Live](#) technology he employed illustrates how new live-streaming apps can create problems, whether it's for football teams, police departments or corporations. Video can now be shot surreptitiously by anyone, friend or foe, with a hand-held smartphone. What you think is a private conversation can be broadcast live to the world on social media, without your permission, causing reputational damage before you even know it.



Brown's video had more than 900,000 views a few hours after it aired. It was removed from Brown's page Monday morning, but the damage was done. Lesson to everyone: You never know when something you are saying or doing is being broadcast, perhaps live, to a worldwide court of public opinion.

Tomlin learned that lesson, but he handled the fallout adeptly. He showed other organizational leaders how to tackle an issue before it tackles you, using five proven strategies:

1. Speak out quickly.

Margaret Speich, senior vice president of strategic and industry communications at the U.S. Dairy Export Council, calls this the "Early Mover Advantage." Speich trains organizations that if they publicly address a crisis quickly they dramatically increase their chances of regaining the public's trust. Tomlin did this. He had the courage and wisdom to address

the media before the league finished its investigation, even before Tomlin met with Brown. It's somewhat counterintuitive to move that fast. But in a crisis, it's often necessary for leaders to go public with what they know, even before they have all the facts. Silence is usually more damaging.

2. Take responsibility.

"Tomlin didn't try to duck the issue with the Las Vegas line, 'What goes on in the locker room stays in the locker room,' " said [Harlan Loeb](#), global practice chair, crisis & reputation risk, for [Edelman](#), a global communications marketing firm. Instead, Tomlin stood tall in the pocket as if he were his quarterback, Big Ben Roethlisberger, exposing himself to a huge hit from 300-pound pass rusher. Said Tomlin: *"I'd like to say the language on the video is regrettable; language by me and by others. And it's regrettable because this thing that is the National Football League, this platform that we have, is a precious and awesome thing and not something that we take very lightly."*



3. "Apologize" empathetically.

Tomlin said, *"we're very sensitive to the opportunity that we have as role models. So I apologize for the content of the video from that perspective, as a parent, as a member of the community, I take that very seriously. And, so, I sincerely issue an apology in that regard."* In some countries, like China, an apology is culturally tantamount as a first step to regaining public trust. It doesn't have to be (corporate lawyers, take note) admitting legal culpability. It does have to be about expressing empathy, acknowledging public harm, even if no one has died and it's "just" psychological. When Tomlin alludes to being a parent he makes it clear he realizes the potential damage done to children who idolize professional athletes.

4. Enforce accountability.

What's going to happen next? The public wants to know wrongdoers will pay for their actions, that justice will be done. What makes this case particularly poignant and challenging is the violator is a superstar, one of the Steelers' "Three B's," an athlete whose herculean effort to get across the goal line with three defenders on his back won the Steelers a game that got them into the playoffs. Tomlin didn't go easy on him: *"Not only is it a violation of our policy, it's a violation of league policy. Both of which he knows. So there's consequences to be dealt with from his perspective. We will punish him . . . we'll do so swiftly, and we'll do so internally."*

5. Talk like a human, from the heart.

Drop the corporate mumbo-jumbo. Don't parse words like a politician. Speak from the head *and* the heart. "You don't want polite prose," said Loeb, who counsels scores of high-profile clients. "Tomlin just said it the way it is. That's refreshing. He showed what leadership is all about. He exhibited what I call controlled detonation, diffusing an issue by letting the bomb go off on his terms."

As a lifetime pro football fan hailing from Wisconsin, I fiercely root for another team still in the NFL playoffs, known more for cheese than steel.

But I couldn't help admiring the way Tomlin and the Steelers quickly and forthrightly employed some of the best practices of crisis communications. This incident could have damaged the Steelers "brand." Instead, I think it enhanced it because Tomlin set the bar high for what it means to conduct yourself the Pittsburgh Steeler way.



"In Chinese, the same two characters are used for crisis and opportunity," explained [Crystal Wang](#), a Shanghai-based director of crisis management and training for Edelman. "These are opposite sides of the same coin. Embedded in Chinese philosophy there is always an opportunity in a crisis. You need to flip the coin to find the positive side from the negative."

He's not a Chinese philosopher, but that's exactly what Tomlin did. Other leaders can learn from the controversy, wherever they live.

Read Tomlin's full statement on nfl.com [here](#).

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Paula, thanks for highlighting that. Talking from the heart feels risky.
But it's riskier not to.

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Concisely said, Rick. Thanks.

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8y ...

Great article. Act quickly, be honest, be upfront and speak from the heart.
First steps to regaining trust and respect!

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8y ...

Thanks, Cesar. Trust and respect: Hard to gain, Easy to lose.

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Epifanio Reyes Jr • 3rd+

Engineer Technician at Altera Corp now part of Intel

8y ...

Go Mike! Good luck Antonio Brown, and Big Ben and the rest of the Steelers Org.

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David A. Washabaugh • 3rd+
Management Consultant at DW Management Development

8y ...

Coach Tomlin the youngest
head coach to win a Superbowl in Pittsburgh has more wisdom than many
realise. Being from Pittsburgh never missed a game you can witness how
he leads the team. I am shocked what Brown did its not how the Steelers
act. ...more

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8y ...

I think you should watch the video. Brown keeps looking into his
smartphone, smiling and preening and straightening his hair,

oblivious to the fact that his coach is talking in the background. You can even hear a teammate say something like, "hey, let's play ...more

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Andrew Stone  • 3rd+

8y ...

Landscaping, Property Management; Specializing in Estate management ...

More interested in what Dan Quinn has to say!

Falcons all day!

Lol

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Mark O'Keefe  Author

8y ...

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Andrew, thanks for commenting, but as a Packers fans, I can't agree with you on that one. Perhaps my next article should focus on what leaders can learn from Aaron Rodgers to inspire their troops when things look bleakest: "Run the table!" ...more

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Omar F. • 3rd+

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Pittsburgh Rules!! LI Super Bowl bound :)

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CONSULTOR EN DESARROLLO ORGANIZACIONAL Y HUMANO

Por algo... es el mejor equipo de los últimos años con 6 super bowls ganados y algunos de sus jugadores están ahora en el salón de la fama de USA.

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Go Steelers , we're hoping Tom breaks a nail and needs a manicure :)

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Aaaaand go Pats!

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