

The Penn State Scandal

Crisis Communications Analysis

On November 4, 2011, a grand jury report was released containing evidence that former Penn State University football defensive coordinator, Gerald “Jerry” Sandusky, had sexually abused eight minors over a period of at least 15 years. Even though several PSU administrators like football Head Coach Joe Paterno, Athletic Director Tim Curley, Vice President for Finance and Business Gary Schultz, and University President Graham Spanier had known about Sandusky’s crimes since 1998, the university failed to report the coordinator’s misconduct and prevented the news from becoming public. Penn State’s decision to cover up Sandusky’s actions led to numerous indictments, millionaire penalties and the collapse of the school’s reputation.

Jerry Sandusky worked at Penn State for 32 years until his retirement at the end of the 1999 season. In 1977, Sandusky founded the non-profit Second Mile, an organization meant to help underprivileged young boys. As part of his retirement package, Sandusky received emeritus status and was granted full access to ASU’s campus and football facilities, where he repeatedly engaged in inappropriate conduct with different boys he met through the Second Mile program.

Sandusky was part of the most powerful circle at Penn State University: the football team. The team was led by Joe Paterno, Head Coach of the Penn State Nittany Lions. Over 46 seasons between 1966 and 2011, Paterno led the Nittany Lions to 37 bowl appearances with 24 wins. He quickly became the face and embodiment of what the university stood for (Bertram, 2019). Paterno gained a lot of traction and power among the administrative body of the university thanks to the funds he raised and donated to PSU. Even though no one knows exactly how much money he brought to the school, the Penn Live Patriot News reports that “some at the university say it’s well above \$1 billion.”

When the grand jury report was released and charges were brought against Sandusky on November 4, 2011, it became clear that Penn State had missed multiple opportunities to bring the situation to light. As more victims came forward, more questions were raised about the way the administration handled the incident. Both Curley and Schultz were accused of making false statements in front of a jury and failing to report sexual abuse of a child, which forced them to resign from their positions. Even though Paterno announced his retirement at the end of the season, both he and President Spanier were fired by the Board of Trustees five days after the allegations were made public.

Why would Penn State leaders Graham Spanier, Tim Curley, Gary Schultz and Joe Paterno ignore such critical allegations and why did they fail to investigate and report Sandusky’s conduct? How did they

fail at communicating with all those involved and how could they have prevented this incident from harming the school's reputation as much as it did?

Misstep #1: Ignore Victims' Allegations and Professional Advice

The first and most important misstep is rooted in the following dilemma: should Penn State have focused on protecting the school's reputation, or should it have protected Sandusky's victims by reporting him to the authorities? The administration's response suggests that they were interested in hiding and ignoring the allegations to protect the school's brand more than offering support to the victims. This misstep is not necessarily a communications error, but rather an unethical decision that prioritized social and financial interests over the wellbeing of dozens of children.

The following is an overview of the missed opportunities that Penn State employees and officials had to report Sandusky's misconduct:

- The first claim was made in 1998 by the mother of an 11-year-old boy who reported that Sandusky had showered with her son. Even though Sandusky admitted showering naked with the boy, and psychologist Alycia Chambers flagged this behavior as a possible case of pedophilia, both the district attorney and the university police chief decided to close the case after psychologist John Seasock reported no indication of child abuse ("Penn State Scandal Fast Facts," 2019). This shows that the administration only listened to what they thought convenient and dismissed any signs of wrongdoing, even though showering with a minor was suspicious enough for them to conduct a more detailed investigation.
- In 2000, janitor James Calhoun informed his superior and another janitor that he saw Sandusky sexually abusing a young boy, but no one reported the incident.
- In 2002, Graduate Assistant Mike McQueary told coach Paterno that he witnessed Sandusky sexually abusing a 10-year-old in the Lasch Building showers. Paterno reported the incident to Tim Curley and Gary Schultz, who decided not to report him to the authorities in an attempt to protect the team and the school's reputation.
- In 2008, a boy's mother reported Sandusky to her son's high school, which banned him from campus and reported him to the police. The fact that the boy's high school was the first to report Sandusky was a breach of trust between Penn State and its constituencies, who later held Penn State accountable for its lack of ethics and transparency.

What They Should Have Done:

Penn State officials should not have approached this incident as a dilemma that forced them to choose between protecting the school's reputation *or* supporting Sandusky's victims. Instead, they should have seen the situation as a whole and understand that by holding their employees accountable, they were also protecting the university's values and reputation.

To do so, Penn State should have listened to the story of the first victim, reported the Sandusky to the government authorities, and put him on investigative leave while the investigation concluded. The university should have communicated this incident internally (athletes, students, alumni, faculty & staff and parents) and prepared public statements for the external community (investors, insurance companies, educational organizations and media). These statements should not have only explained the problem but also reinstate the school's values (integrity, respect, responsibility and community) and explain the actions the school was taking to solve it (listening to the victims, isolating a potential threat and liability, and collaborating with the authorities).

This would allow the university to own its narrative and position itself to stem the flow of rumors and inaccurate stories *before* they got out (Fink, 2013, p. 23). Additionally, reporting the case to Penn State's insurance company would also have helped the school avoid potential financial downfalls in case they needed to settle with the victims.

Misstep #2: Build a Toxic Environment with No Reporting Systems in Place

The events listed above show two underlying problems Penn State did not consider. First, the university failed to have a reporting system in place where students, employees and parents could report suspicious or inappropriate activity. This explains why both Janitor James Calhoun (2000) and Graduate Assistant Mike McQueary (2002) were unsure of how or where to report Sandusky's actions.

Second, Penn State's football team leaders built a toxic work environment where money, success and power prevailed. In an interview, one janitor told CNN "I know Paterno has so much power that if he had wanted to get rid of someone, I would have been gone (...). Football runs this university" (2012).

Penn State professor Ronald A. Smith said in an interview that Paterno had successfully ousted the school's VP of Student Affairs Vicky Triponey, the first female executive to assume that position (2017). According to CNN, Triponey "experienced firsthand the clubby, jock-snapping culture, the sense of entitlement, the cloistered existence" at Penn State, and she "clashed often with Paterno over who should discipline football players when they got into trouble" (2012). Triponey's resignation evidenced

how the university leaders were eager to please Paterno by discouraging dissent and protecting the reputation of the football team at all costs.

The excessive power that the Athletic Department had over the rest of the university explains why key witnesses like the janitor and the graduate assistant were unwilling to report the incident to the authorities, and instead decided to keep it as a secret that needed to be “swiped under the rug.”

What They Should Have Done:

Penn State should not have assumed that its employees knew how to handle sexual harassment incidents in the workplace. The university should have educated its community (students, faculty, and staff) on how to identify sexual misconduct and put in place an accessible reporting system where anyone could report these incidents anonymously.

PSU should have also focused on building a broader and healthier sense of community by shining a light on other important groups and organizations on campus. This would allow the school to repurpose its narrative and have a more equitable distribution of power among campus leaders and authorities.

Misstep #3: Not Having a Proactive Communications Plan in Place

The scandal broke almost 15 years *after* the first victim filed a claim against Sandusky. Even though Penn State’s officials had known about Sandusky’s wrongdoing for more than a decade, the incident came out to the public through an external source: the grand jury report.

The school’s unwillingness to act on these claims had two ripple effects: one, more sexual harassment cases occurred; and two, the media took over the course of the narrative. Both effects worsened the crisis by allowing Sandusky to hurt more children and portraying the school as an unethical entity whose decisions were mainly driven by its financial interests.

After the scandal broke in November 2011, Penn State’s communications efforts were rather *reactive*. The sudden resignation of Curley and Schultz suggested that the university was guilty of hiding important information from the authorities and the community. Additionally, the unexpected firing of Graham Spanier and Joe Paterno led to violent protests from students who did not understand why their coach was being blamed.

What They Should Have Done:

As crisis expert Steven Fink says, “*in a crisis, it is always better to play offense than defense*” (2013, p. 24). Penn State’s *proactive* communications plan should have been in place before the media took the narrative of the story.

- First, the school should have communicated the incident and the corrective remedies to key stakeholders right after the first accusation was made. The school should have also acknowledged any missteps in the process.
- Second, Penn State should have designated a crisis management team to deal exclusively with the crisis and monitor its progress.
- Third, the crisis management team should have proactively contacted the media and shared its story and corrective actions *before* the media told the story for them.
- Fourth, the university should have a media-trained spokesperson to communicate with the press. This spokesperson should be a knowledgeable leader who was not involved in the crisis (i.e. a lawyer, board member or school executive).
- Fifth, the crisis management team should have been in constant contact with government authorities and share any official documents with the community before or as soon as they were made public.

Misstep #4: Failure to Collaborate with External Authorities

As stated before, both Curley and Schultz were accused of perjury and failure to report child sex abuse to the authorities. Even though Spanier, Paterno, Calhoun and McQueary were not indicted, they disregarded the case and covered up Sandusky’s attacks by not saying anything to the police.

Penn State’s officials acted as a closed system that failed to interact and communicate with external entities in response to this crisis. This not only brought serious legal and financial consequences but also ended up destroying the trust that key stakeholders had in the university. The school’s ethical standards were put into question as they prioritized their interests and failed to protect a vulnerable group of children.

What They Should Have Done:

Penn State should have reported Sandusky after the first claim was recorded and do everything in its power to collaborate with the authorities. The university should have also launched an internal investigation to determine if there was a violation of their contract with those involved in the case. This

would have stopped any other cases from happening and would have prevented the school from facing legal fines for violating the Clery Act. It would also reflect that Penn State's values are a priority and that no member of their community is exempt from complying with such values.

Misstep #5: Make Public Statements Before the Investigation Has Concluded

The movie "Paterno" (2018) shows President Spanier preparing a public statement right after the news broke: "I have known and worked daily with Tim and Gary for more than 16 years. I am confident in the way they handled the allegations about a former university employee. I am confident the record will show that these charges are groundless and that they conducted themselves professionally and appropriately." Coach Joe Paterno tells him that he thinks it is stupid to make these statements without knowing what really happened. And he was right.

Spanier's first statement offering the indicted officials unconditional support is a communications error that made the university look incapable of fighting sex offenders.

What They Should Have Done:

Without gathering all the facts first, Penn State's president should not have made any assumptions about anyone's innocence. All those involved in the case should have been put on investigative leave while the university and the authorities conducted their investigations. Any public statements should have been focused on showing that the school was collaborating with the authorities and taking corrective measures.

Misstep #6: Frame Specific Actors Without Assuming Full Responsibility

After the scandal broke out, Penn State's President and Board of Trustees took the strategy of staying silent. On November 8, 2011, President Spanier announced that Paterno's press conference had been canceled "due to the on-going legal circumstances centered around the recent allegations and charges" (Boren, 2011).

Once the board realized this strategy was not working, they responded to media criticism by distancing the school from those involved in the scandal and blaming them for the crisis. This is why, five days after the news broke, both Paterno and Spanier were fired over a phone call in the middle of the night.

This move was not well received by the student and alumni community, who saw coach Paterno as a role model. After the decision was made, hundreds of upset students and reporters gathered outside Paterno's house to protest.

What They Should Have Done:

Before making any decisions, Penn State should have taken the time to conduct a thorough investigation in conjunction with the authorities to determine who should be fired and who shouldn't. In the meantime, all those involved in the case should have been placed on investigative leave. Once the decisions were made, the university should have issued a joint statement acknowledging Paterno's and Spanier's contributions to the community and explaining the facts behind the decision to fire them or asking them to step down.

Misstep #7: Failure to Design Specific Message Points for Key Stakeholders

As stated before, Penn State had to deal with many opposing key audiences whose interests diverged from the organization's interests. The university failed to develop key messages that targeted each audience, something that infuriated students, faculty and parents, and allowed the press to narrate the events however they wanted to.

What They Should Have Done:

Penn State's crisis management team should have identified both internal and external stakeholders and tailor each message according to what they needed to hear. This would have prevented the crisis to grow as much as it did, and it would also have helped Penn State establish a trust bond with the communities and organizations involved.

The following is a list of stakeholders that Penn State failed to proactively target in its efforts to abate the crisis:

Internal Stakeholders	External Stakeholders
Student athletes	Local authorities & prosecutors - FBI
Coaches	Insurance company
Students & incoming students	NCAA
Staff & faculty	Big Ten Conference
Parents	Middle States Commission on Higher Education
Alumni	Department of Education
Investors/Donors	Investors/Donors
	Local & national media

What Penn State Did Right

It is evident that the university’s response to the crisis was improvised and disorganized, not to mention unethical and even illegal at some point. The lack of transparency, the absence of protocols and reporting systems, and the rushed decision-making affected dozens of vulnerable children and damaged the university’s reputation at a national scale. But there are some actions that led Penn State to gradually recover from this crisis and rebuild trust relationships with its stakeholders:

- Hire strong replacements to take over the work of those who left the university after the scandal. For example, the hiring of Bill O’Brien as the new head coach positively changed the way athletes and the general public saw the crisis. He delivered positive messages and achieved several wins with the team (Fink, 2013, p. 171).
- Appoint former FBI director Louis Freeh to lead an independent investigation into the events, including the university’s role in covering up previous statements and allegations.
- Comply with sanctions imposed by the NCAA, the Big Ten Conference, the Department of Education as well as pay settlements to the victims.
- Donate to the Pennsylvania Coalition against Rape and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and starting the Center for the Protection of Children at their Hershey Medical Center.

- Hire two public relations companies, Edelman and La Torre Communications, to launch campaigns focused on rebuilding trust and reputation. An example is the campaign “Faces of Penn State,” which refocused the narrative and told successful stories of the Penn State community.
- Even though Paterno’s involvement in these events was never established, removing his statue showed the university’s willingness to move forward and honor the victims.

References

- Bertram, C. (2019). The Rise and Fall of Joe Paterno. *Biography.com*. Retrieved from www.biography.com/news/joe-paterno-movie-hbo-paterno.
- Borem, C. (2011). Joe Paterno's press conference canceled. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/early-lead/post/joe-pateros-press-conference-canceled/2011/11/08/gIQAExnA1M_blog.html.
- Fink, S. (2013). *Crisis Communications, the Definitive Guide to Managing the Message*. United States: McGraw Hill.
- Herman, A. & Levinson, B. (2018). Paterno. United States: HBO Films, Sony Pictures Television.
- Murphy, R. (2012). Joe Paterno: A Life – A Fundraiser Supreme. *Penn Live Patriot News*. Retrieved from www.pennlive.com/specialprojects/2012/01/joe_paterno_a_life_-_a_fundrai.html.
- O'Neill, Ann. (2012). The woman who stood up to Joe Paterno. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2012/07/15/us/triponey-paterno-penn-state/index.html>.
- Penn State Scandal Fast Facts. (2019). *CNN*. Retrieved from www.cnn.com/2013/10/28/us/penn-state-scandal-fast-facts/index.html.
- Smith R. (2017, March 12). Joe Paterno, Jerry Sandusky and the Crisis in Penn State Athletics: Wounded Lions. *PA Books Podcasts*. PCN. Podcast retrieved from radiopublic.com/pa-books-on-pcn-yWwOZW/ep/s1!ec8e5.