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Examining the Strategies in Response to Crises in Major League Baseball

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the crisis response strategies of Major League Baseball (MLB) during the following events: the steroids scandal, the Houston Astros cheating scandal, and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The hypothesis tested is as follows: MLB's crisis response strategies are ineffective, as they are directly related to the league's poor image in the public eye. Research includes a review of academic literature explaining crisis communication theories, as well as the relationship between crisis communication and public relations (PR). The paper concludes with recommendations for how the league can improve its crisis communication and crisis response strategies in the future to remain dominant in the American professional sports industry.

Chapter One: Introduction

General Introduction to the Organization and Research Project

Major League Baseball is an American professional baseball organization headquartered in Midtown Manhattan, New York. Founded in 1876, MLB is the oldest professional sports league in the United States and Canada. It is comprised of two leagues, the American League and the National League, with a total of thirty teams competing between the months of April and October of each year. Teams play a 162-game season with five teams from each league qualifying for a postseason tournament leading up to the World Series Championship matchup between the winners of each league. Given the long history of Major League Baseball, the league has faced several crises and scandals compromising its organizational stability. Its first major crisis happened in 1919, with the Black Sox Scandal charging that eight members of the Chicago White Sox were bribed to lose that year's world series to the Cincinnati Reds. According to the Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2021), the accused players admitted to a grand jury that they threw the 1919 World Series in return for a bribe. Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who was appointed as the first commissioner of baseball due to the inadequacy of the former three-man baseball commission, banned these players from the sport for life. With this new leadership in place, the league finally established a chief executive officer who was responsible for managing similar crises and scandals in the future.

Fast forwarding to the present day, MLB has tackled several crises since the Black Sox Scandal of 1919. However, according to Gonyeau (2021), data gathered throughout the past couple of years show that baseball has started to decline in popularity compared to other sports such as football and basketball. While this issue can be attributed to different reasons concerning the sport of baseball itself, MLB has faced several key crises that threaten its position as one of

the major sports leagues in North America. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine MLB's crisis communication strategies in response to three separate events. The league's leadership was tested when the steroids and Houston Astros cheating scandals occurred. Meanwhile, MLB was most recently forced to shorten its season due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The detailed analysis of Major League Baseball's crisis communication strategies that follows could ideally be used as a reference to improve its response to crises in the future.

The Research Problem

The purpose of this project is to examine the effectiveness of the crisis communication strategies adopted by Major League Baseball. It will synthesize literature concerning crisis communication theory and the relationship between crisis communication and public relations. Three separate crises will be analyzed: the steroids scandal, the Houston Astros cheating scandal, and the COVID-19 pandemic. With the league's recent decline in popularity, it is crucial for MLB leadership to effectively communicate and take action during times of crisis. Therefore, the research problem centers around the failures in crisis communication by the commissioner of baseball. By identifying the mistakes made in response to the most recent and prevalent crises of the past two decades, the league can move forward by utilizing more effective crisis communication practices in the future.

Rationale for the Research Project

This project seeks to analyze MLB's previous responses to major crises as learning points for use in potential future scandals and crisis events. The researcher believes that the league has made several mistakes in its crisis communication practices throughout the past two decades.

With Major League Baseball's popularity declining, how can the commissioner of baseball effectively communicate with the league's fans to maintain brand loyalty, particularly in times of crisis? What crisis communication practices are deemed the most effective and what theories can be applied to MLB's previous communication and responses throughout various crises? These questions are addressed in the literature review, which is found in the next chapter of this paper.

Definition and Explanation of Key Terminology

According to Ulmer et al. (2017), crises are unique moments in the history of organizations with the characteristics of surprise, threat, and short response time. Meanwhile, crisis communication involves managing the perception of the crisis reality, while shaping public opinion and informing various audiences about what is going on (Ulmer et al., 2017). Effective crisis communicators must be able to change accordingly and follow the dynamic nature of a crisis. This commonly involves embracing the crisis situation and taking immediate action to solve the detrimental event. Ultimately, crisis communication can be transformative if done correctly.

Furthermore, crisis management focuses on the operation management of the situation (Ulmer et al., 2017). The best predictor for effective crisis management is strong, positive stakeholder relationships. For the purpose of this paper, the key stakeholders are baseball fans, as they are often relied on for support to both maintain the sport's popularity and spread MLB brand awareness. Effective crisis managers (and communicators) meet with their stakeholders to remain transparent and keep the public updated about a given crisis event.

Chapter 2: Hypothesis and Theory

Brief Overview of Theoretical Foundations

This paper will identify two theories utilized to explain the crisis communication tactics of Major League Baseball. With these in mind, it will be easier to understand the shortcomings of the league's handling of various crises. First, organizational renewal theory can be applied to organizations seeking to move forward from the effects of a crisis. Ulmer et al. (2017) claim that there is potential for positive discourse following a crisis that emphasizes the opportunities presented by the occurrence of the crisis. There are four theoretical objectives central to creating a discourse of renewal following a crisis. Organizational learning suggests that organizations must learn from a crisis if they are to emerge successfully from the event (Ulmer et al., 2017). Ethical communication is another key factor that allows for renewal following a crisis. Next, having a prospective vision rather than a retrospective vision after a crisis occurs is crucial for organizational renewal. Lastly, communicating with stakeholders to construct and maintain perceptions of reality is critical to managing a crisis. Ultimately, having leadership with a vision along with a strong positive reputation helps empower stakeholders to join an organization in moving on from a crisis event (Ulmer et al., 2017).

The next theory applied in this paper is situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). This evidence-based framework provides an understanding of how to maximize reputational protection afforded by crisis communication. SCCT is informed by attribution theory, another framework outlining that people tend to search for the causes of events, especially those that are negative or unexpected. SCCT deems crises as being perceived by organizational leadership as reputational threats. Crises can give people reasons to lose faith in an organization. Ultimately, this shift to an unfavorable reputation can often change how stakeholders interact with an

organization. This framework also outlines several crisis response strategies that fall into the categories of deny, bolstering, diminish, excuse, rebuild, and victim-age. According to Coombs (2007), SCCT holds that as the reputational threat and negative affect from a crisis increases, crisis managers must utilize crisis response strategies with the necessary level of accepting crisis responsibility.

In summary, the theoretical framework described above helps discern effective and ineffective crisis communication from each other. Effective crisis communicators strive for organizational renewal and effectively decrease the reputational threat presented by a crisis. An analysis of three specific crises relevant to MLB presented later in this paper suggests the effectiveness of the league's crisis communication strategies with these theories applied.

Overview of Literature Reviewed, Discussed, and Applied

In the process of researching effective crisis communication practices for Major League Baseball, and other sports leagues, a literature review was conducted to gather information about the topic. The literature used to explain this topic is mainly composed of scholarly articles describing crisis communication, public relations, as well as their connection to sports leagues.

According to Oakes (2006), professional sports have an inherent need for media coverage. This can be good and bad for an organization, as the whole world can see a crisis unfold as a result of mass media coverage. That being said, Hopwood et al. (2012) discuss publics, or the groups of people who can have an effect upon or are affected by an organization. They are responsible for not only granting legitimacy to an organization, but also being depended on by organizations for approval. The media can also have a profound effect on the publics' perception of a given sports league. This causes crises to become media events since

they are generally being covered by the media as important news. The media's way it makes meaning out of a crisis can have major implications for how a given crisis event is perceived by publics. For example, the media framed National Basketball Association (NBA) Commissioner David Stern's decision regarding a brawl between NBA players as a way to appease white corporate sponsors and white audiences, who were supposedly feeling threatened by the hip-hop culture the league once embraced (Hopwood et al., 2012). To go along with this, the methods of reporting crises from a league's public relations department have a profound effect on how fans perceive the league (Hopwood et al., 2012). Newer technologies such as the internet, television, satellite radio, and even older media such as radio and print continually feed information to the public. These methods of communication can be as influential towards opinion formulation as the message itself. Ultimately, information, bad news or controversial issues with players from all or some of these media sources can lead to the publics' formulation of negative opinions concerning a given sports league (Hopwood et al., 2012).

Sports fans, a large population of a sports league's publics, are an important public relations mechanism for sports leagues as well. According to Hopwood et al. (2012), they tend to take on the roles of 'brand ambassadors' in a way that is often envied by many other consumer-oriented organizations. Furthermore, the most passionate sports fans follow their team through the good times and the bad times (crises). Fan and supporter groups are the most visible and persuasive form of communication due to their enthusiasm and innate ability to communicate their passion for sports. Ultimately, sports organizations must tap into this limitless resource as an effective public relations and communication technique, especially during times of crisis.

Hopwood et al. (2012) proceed to discuss crisis response strategies. Effective crisis communication is needed if a situation is to be defused or eliminated. If done correctly, it can

sometimes bring an organization a more positive reputation than it possessed before the crisis occurred. Of course, if an organization fails to respond to a crisis in the correct manner, a bad situation can become worse. Crisis communicators must focus mainly on the development and framing of messages to stakeholders, particularly the media. The authors also mention several strategies for dealing with the media when discussing crises. Organizations must start by telling the story and repeating it often with consistency. Among other strategies mentioned, the authors stress the importance of telling the truth, keeping calm, striving for proactive responses that can neutralize a hostile situation, and using language that shows organizational leadership cares and is trying to solve the crisis. Public relations practitioners should be proactive in their reputation management as a type of preventative PR, so that a crisis can be minimized when it occurs (Hopwood et al., 2012). Furthermore, Zaremba (2014) describes various crisis communication truths that shape effective crisis communication. First, crises are inevitable occurrences so crisis communicators must plan to combat them before they happen. For crisis leaders, transparent and honest communication is key to effective crisis communication. Leaders must follow a golden-rule approach of telling their stakeholders what they would want to know about a crisis if they were a stakeholder themselves. Ultimately, an organization's culture can determine its success in overcoming a crisis and the proper communication requires training and skillsets that even bright executives may not possess (Zaremba, 2014).

Hypothesis

The hypothesis in question for this research project is as follows: Major League Baseball's crisis response strategies are ineffective, as they are directly related to the league's poor image in the public eye.

Chapter 3: Methods

Study Method and Design

This research paper uses the theoretical framework and literature presented above to analyze three prevalent crises in Major League Baseball over the past two decades. Zaremba (2014) describes the various truths that shape effective crisis communication. Additionally, Ulmer et al. (2017) provide the characteristics of effective crisis communication as well as emphasizing a theory for organizational renewal following a crisis. Coombs (2007) adds to the theoretical foundations of crisis communication with his description of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Meanwhile, Hopwood et al. (2012) describe the role of the media for sports leagues throughout crises as well as their take on the most effective crisis response strategies.

As stated previously, this study seeks to analyze the crisis response strategies of Major League Baseball and determine the effectiveness of the league's practices. Given the league's declining popularity in the United States, MLB's recent failures are predicted to be related to its techniques for dealing with various crises. Using the principles described by the researchers mentioned above, the results of this study will likely suggest the ineffectiveness of MLB's crisis communication practices.

Description and Justification of Analytical Techniques

This research project is mainly qualitative, as it seeks to prove a positive correlation between the MLB's failures and decline in popularity and ineffective crisis communication practices using theoretical tests applied to three different crises. Determining the success or failure of the league's crisis communication practices involves the use of data related to the

league's popularity in the aftermath of a given crisis' occurrence. Meanwhile, the attribution of the crisis communication failures is described using qualitative conclusions drawn from an analysis of the literature mentioned above. For example, examining how MLB's leadership communicated with its stakeholders during a crisis will likely expose the shortcomings and failures of the league's crisis response. The crisis events in this paper were gathered exclusively from secondary research. These crises are either unique moments strictly pertaining to the league itself or current events with a worldwide impact. Therefore, the communication techniques used by MLB throughout these crises are documented externally by various media outlets.

Assumptions and Limitations

This project assumes that the theoretical framework and literature regarding crisis communication can be applied to all organizations. The authors mentioned previously emphasize their theories as being universally applied. Of course, crises are unique moments in the history of organizations, making them rather unpredictable in nature. Due to the varying characteristics of all crises in general, this project uses theoretical framework purely as a foundation for examining the three crises.

The most prevalent limitation of this project is the absence of primary research. Being a literature review, the findings are going to be primarily based on the theoretical framework outlined by crisis communication scholars. This secondary data is crucial to the researcher's understanding of the characteristics that make up successful crisis communication. However, the use of interviews and surveys could have provided critical data pertaining to MLB's image in the public eye, which is predicted to be related to the league's crisis communication practices. Therefore, although the use of secondary data provides the researcher with a general idea of

MLB's crisis communication tactics, having primary data could have further strengthened the correlation between those practices and the league's popularity.

Chapter Four: Findings

Steroids Scandal (1991 - Present)

The use of steroids and other performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) is one of the greatest controversies in professional sports history. According to Preiato (2019), the use of these drugs gives people, especially athletes, several advantages in strength, power, muscle endurance, as well as enhanced recovery from workouts and injuries. However, steroids also present several risks of use, including the risk of infection and addiction (Preato, 2019). In 1990, US Congress passed the Anabolic Steroids Control Act, officially deeming steroids as an illegal drug in the United States. Since then, the only way to use steroids legally is to have them prescribed by a medical professional for a certain condition, such as low testosterone or a muscle-wasting disease (Preato, 2019). Being in charge of one of the major professional sports organizations in the United States, MLB Commissioner Fay Vincent released a memo in 1991 stating:

“The possession, sale or use of any illegal drug or controlled substance by Major League players and personnel is strictly prohibited. Major League players or personnel involved in the possession, sale, or use of any illegal drug or controlled substance are subject to discipline by the commissioner and risk permanent expulsion from the game... This prohibition applies to all illegal drugs and controlled substances, including steroids or prescription drugs for which the individual possession of the drug does not have a prescription” (See Appendix for full memo).

According to Rymer (2013), while this statement established a formal rule banning steroids from Major League Baseball, there was no formal drug testing for the league's players at the time which gave the players no motivation to follow the rule. Because of this, the 1991 MLB season saw Jose Canseco, a noted steroid user, lead the American League with forty-four home runs. Three years later, the league's slugging percentage rose to .424, the highest mark since 1930. These were clear signs that the league had a steroid crisis happening. In 1996, a total of seventeen players hit at least forty home runs, which is currently an MLB record. This was further evidence of a crisis unfolding, since several of these players notably had far lower career highs in home runs before that season. Early in 1997, the newly elected commissioner of baseball, Bud Selig, issued a memo rehashing what Fay Vincent Stated in 1991, stating that steroids were illegal in baseball and urging clubs to make sure players knew it. However, there was still no testing and no clear-cut punishment in place for using steroids (Rymer, 2013).

The power surge continued throughout the 1997 season, with a dozen players hitting at least forty home runs along with a record four players hitting at least fifty home runs in 1998. To go along with this, while a bottle of androstenedione, a substance banned by the NFL, NCAA, and the Olympics, was spotted in home run leader Mark McGwire's locker midway through the 1998 season, he went on to hit seventy home runs that year without any controversy or punishment (Rymer, 2013). The power surge continued for the next couple of years, and by 2001, MLB decided that it needed to take action. In April 2001, ten years after the initial memo condemning and banning steroids from the league was released, Major League baseball began testing minor league players for steroids. The league was unable to implement drug testing at the major league level without an agreement with the Players Association, which at the time was responsible for protecting the interests of several steroids' users in MLB (Rymer, 2013).

According to “Drug Policy coverage” on MLB.com (2021), all players not on a major league club’s 40-man roster were subject to random testing for performance enhancing drugs and drugs of abuse starting in 2001 with the penalties as follows: 15-game ban for the first offense, 30-game ban for the second offense, 60-game ban for the third offense, one-year ban for the fourth offense, and a permanent ban from the game for the fifth offense. By 2005, MLB suspended thirty-eight minor leaguers in the years since testing was put in place (Rymer, 2013). While this was a sign of action being taken by the league to mitigate the crisis, MLB PED users continued to thrive as Barry Bonds broke Mark McGwire’s single-season home run record in 2001 with seventy-three.

By the start of the 2002 season, suspicion of steroids in baseball was growing immensely. While fans were enjoying the feats of Steroid Era stars, they were also becoming wary of how the feats were being accomplished (Rymer, 2013). Major League Baseball reacted to this growing suspicion by agreeing to a new deal with the MLB Player’s Association (MLBPA) that included random drug testing for steroids and PEDs. Formal testing began in 2003, more than a decade after the drug was deemed illegal by the US government. However, testing was anonymous, and the results carried no punishments, with the sole purpose of finding out how many players were using steroids. The league’s plan at the time was to only act on the issue if more than five percent of the league was using PEDs. The results in November 2003 forced them to take action, as more than five percent of MLB players were discovered to be using PEDs. The league used this finding as an excuse to begin mandatory testing protocols in 2004, but with no punishments for first offenders and no names made public until the players were disciplined. Despite this new testing procedure, nine players hit at least forty home runs in a 2004 season that saw a league-high slugging percentage of .428. In December of that year, Commissioner Selig

urged the Player's Union to consider a stricter PED policy. This was in response to not only the suspicious power numbers during the latest season, but due to two major league players being invited to speak in front of a grand jury about the Bay-Area Laboratory Co-operative (BALCO) which illegally supplied steroids to professional athletes as well (Rymer, 2013). The new punishments put in place were as follows: 10-day ban for first-time offenders, 30-day ban for second-time offenders, 60-day ban for third-time offenders, and a one-year ban for fourth-time offenders. The agreement called for first-time offenders to have their names be made public as well (Rymer, 2013).

As a result, a dozen suspensions occurred throughout the 2005 season, showing that many players were still using PEDs. According to Rymer (2013), the results of the 2005 season proved that suspending players only 10 games for a first-time offense was not enough to convince them to stop using PEDs. This led to the league enforcing stricter penalties in 2006, which still stand today. These penalties call for a 50-game ban for first-time offenders, 100-game ban for second-time offenders, and a lifetime ban for third-time offenders. It was at this time that amphetamines were added to the league's list of banned substances as well (Rymer, 2013). Commissioner Selig also appointed Senator George Mitchell to investigate the history of PEDs in baseball in response to a book called *Game of Shadows*, which detailed the actions of BALCO and MLB player Barry Bonds as fueling the steroids crisis. Mitchell released a report in 2007 tarnishing the names of several big-league players, while emphasizing steroid use as a serious threat to the integrity of baseball. The publication of this report combined with the strict punishments put in place by Selig had a positive effect on limiting steroid use in Major League Baseball. However, another scandal exposed in 2013 involved Biogenesis, an anti-aging clinic in South Florida supplying human growth hormone (HGH) and other PEDs to several high-profile

MLB players. This resulted in several player suspensions once they were discovered to be linked to the clinic. Additionally, as shown by the latest positive drug test produced by New York Mets second baseman Robinson Cano before the start of the 2021 season, PEDs are still being abused by professional athletes and do not seem to be leaving the game of baseball anytime soon.

As mentioned previously, effective crisis communicators must be able to change accordingly and follow the dynamic nature of a crisis (Ulmer et al., 2017). This commonly involves embracing the crisis situation and taking immediate action to solve the detrimental event. While the league's commissioner released a memo condemning steroid use immediately after the crisis events commenced, Major League Baseball failed to quickly adapt to the situation with restrictions that would help mitigate the crisis. The problem was clear, in that many players showcased abnormal power numbers that threatened the integrity of the game. Fans are the most important stakeholder of Major League Baseball, as the league conducts its operations as a service to baseball fans globally. It was not until they started showing displeasure with the steroid crisis in 2003 that the league finally came to an agreement with the MLBPA that enforced drug testing all players. This was more than a decade after the drug was deemed illegal in the United States, showcasing the league's lack of urgency when it came to trying to control and mitigate the effects of the crisis. There was also a lack of transparency in how the crisis was communicated to the public, as the names of players who tested positive for PEDs were not shared publicly until their second offense was discovered by the league. The crisis continued to escalate until stricter drug testing and disciplinary policies were put in place in 2006. These actions were taken fifteen years after the initial memo condemning steroid use was released by the commissioner of baseball. Overall, the lack of urgency, transparency, and adaptation to the

crisis situation illustrates the ineffectiveness of MLB's crisis communication strategies throughout the steroids scandal.

Furthermore, Coomb's (2007) Situational Crisis Communication theory holds that as the reputational threat and negative affect from a crisis increases, crisis managers must utilize crisis response strategies with the necessary level of accepting crisis responsibility. This crisis falls into the preventable cluster of this framework, as the players took inappropriate actions that violated a law against steroid use in the US. This presented a strong reputational threat to the organization, since fans started to become wary of the abnormally high level of play of several MLB players by the early 2000s. To repair the league's reputation, former commissioner Bud Selig spoke out against media groups claiming that the league was slow to react to the crisis, saying "We were not slow to react. In fact, I heard that this morning, and it aggravated me all over again" (Blum, 2013). While this statement is not denying that the crisis occurred, it is an attempt to excuse Major League Baseball from being responsible for the long duration of the crisis. While there's no question that the current rules in place regarding PEDs in MLB are effective at limiting PED use by its players, the amount of time it took to get to this point shows clear flaws in the league's crisis communication tactics throughout the past three decades. Ultimately, Selig refused to take responsibility for the longevity of the steroids scandal, even though the urgency of its communication and implementation of measures to mitigate the crisis occurred more than a decade after the drug was deemed illegal by the United States.

Astros Cheating Scandal (2017-2020)

Signs are an integral part of the game of baseball. Throughout a baseball game, every pitch thrown is determined by the sign being conveyed by the number of fingers held down by

the catcher for the pitcher to see. Hitting a baseball is one of the most difficult tasks in all of sports due to several factors. Most pitches generally vary in velocity between eighty and one hundred miles per hour. Being able to time a swing to hit a given pitch is one of the most crucial aspects involved in hitting a baseball. That being said, when a hitter knows the speed of a pitch that is coming their way, they are able to effectively time their swing to hit the ball. This brings the discussion to the second crisis being discussed in this paper. An MLB investigation revealed that the Houston Astros engaged in electronic sign-stealing through trash can banging communication and other means throughout the 2017 and 2018 seasons. According to Bernstein (2020), reporting suggests that methods to steal signs were first plotted in 2016. At that time, operation “Codebreaker” was presented to former Astros General Manager Jeff Luhnow by an intern named Derek Vigeo, who would eventually be promoted to director of team operations (Bernstein, 2020). The presentation set forth the premise of a systematic sign-stealing scheme in which the Astros would illegally use cameras to get live intel into what type of pitch was on the way and pass that information to hitters in real time, giving them an astronomical advantage over the opposing team. The Astros committed to this scheme in 2017, with veteran player Carlos Beltran and bench coach Alex Cora acting as the primary on-the-ground figures in executing the plan. Bernstein (2020) cites that most of the other players on the team became involved in some capacity or were at least aware of what was happening.

The Astros went on to win the 2017 World Series, with reports claiming the team was using the same cheating methods throughout the playoff run. While this was all happening, people and teams around Major League Baseball started taking notice to the trash can banging scheme, with the Oakland Athletics filing an official complaint to MLB suspecting Houston was illegally stealing signs. Other teams followed suit in reaching out to the league with similar

suspicious, and by November 2019, *The Athletic* published an official report detailing the sign-stealing allegations against the Houston Astros. It was not until this negative publicity occurred that Major League Baseball decided to launch its own investigation into the Astros. Bernstein (2020) notes that MLB did not announce a comprehensive investigation of this scale after other teams such as the Indians and Red Sox complained about the Astros' scheme back in 2018. In January 2020, the league released its findings on the Astros, which confirmed the team's use of illegal sign-stealing methods throughout the 2017 and 2018 seasons. It proceeded to issue one-year suspensions for the Astros' manager and general manager, along with a \$5 million fine and the loss of first and second round draft picks for 2020 and 2021. While no players were punished, the league publicly pinned the scandal mostly on the players and former Astros bench coach Alex Cora, saying that it could not confirm that Houston's front office acted in bad faith throughout the scheme's occurrence. The *Wall Street Journal* later revealed in February 2020 that Houston's general manager was aware of the scheme as early as late-2016. Bernstein (2020) cites this revelation as a significant allegation considering Major League Baseball's assertion that the Astros' cheating was player-driven. To go along with this, many stakeholders of the league, including players and fans, wished for the Astros to have their World Series title stripped from them. According to Silverman (2020), MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred responded to these wishes by calling the World Series trophy a "piece of metal" and claimed revoking the Astros' title seemed "futile." Los Angeles Dodgers third baseman Justin Turner responded to these statements, saying "For him to devalue it the way he did yesterday just tells me how out of touch he is with the players in this game" (Silverman, 2020).

The most important publics of Major League Baseball are its fans, since they are the main recipients of the entertainment being provided by the league. In the case of the Astros cheating

scandal, however, MLB teams and players were the primary stakeholders being affected by the crisis events. Throughout the two-year span of the scandal, the Astros were considered one of the best teams in baseball due to the team's dominant performances and World Series championship. However, as stated previously, other MLB teams were suspicious of the Astros' methods of winning, filing numerous complaints and reports to the league's office. These teams, for the most part, were losing to the Astros because their signs were being stolen from them. According to Ulmer et al. (2017), effective crisis communicators meet with their stakeholders to remain transparent and keep them updated about a given crisis event. Major League Baseball, led by Commissioner Rob Manfred, failed to do so while managing the Astros cheating scandal. MLB leadership was aware of the scandal, since its internal stakeholders were filing formal complaints about the Astros' suspicious activities. However, the league failed to acknowledge these complaints by refusing to communicate with these teams and start a formal investigation.

It was not until *The Athletic* published an official report detailing the sign-stealing allegations that MLB launched an investigation into the crisis. This delay of action allowed the Astros to continue cheating an additional year when their actions could have been halted by the league much sooner. Following the SCCT framework outlined by Coombs (2007), Major League Baseball was utilizing the denial response to crisis in an attempt to avoid any negative publicity surrounding the Astros cheating scandal. Unfortunately for MLB's brand reputation, the allegations filed by various teams in the league reached the media, causing the crisis events to be exposed by outside news sources rather than the league's own leadership. Therefore, by denying the crisis' existence throughout the 2017 and 2018 seasons, Major League Baseball only delayed the negative affect that would arrive from the public once the crisis was finally exposed by the media. Additionally, while the league eventually dealt punishments to the coaches responsible

for the scheme, the league asserted that the scandal was player-driven. By doing so, the league once again showed a lack of transparent crisis communication, since a later investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* revealed the Astros' upper-level management was well aware of the scheme as early as late-2016. Ultimately, by failing to quickly take action and respond with transparency to its internal stakeholders, Major League Baseball utilized ineffective crisis communication allowing one of its own teams to lead a detailed cheating scheme for multiple years.

The COVID-19 Pandemic (2020-Present)

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced a global shutdown back in March 2020 which would affect all people and businesses greatly throughout the year. Similar to other sports leagues in the United States, Major League Baseball was forced to delay the start of its season to July 2020. The National Basketball Association and National Hockey League resumed their respective seasons around the same time during the Summer of 2020. According to Stieb (2020), of the three major American sports leagues to return to play during the pandemic, MLB was the only one to experience an outbreak of coronavirus among its players. On July 26, only three days after the season began, eleven players and two coaches on the Miami Marlins tested positive for COVID-19. This outbreak forced the league to immediately suspend the team's season temporarily. Before this occurred, however, it was revealed that Marlins management was aware that several members of the team had tested positive, but leadership decided to go ahead and play the team's scheduled game on that day anyway. This, at the time, suggested a questionable level of pandemic seriousness by the upper-level Marlins management. MLB also conducted an investigation finding that Marlins players failed to follow coronavirus protocols on their road trip

to Atlanta. According to Anderson (2020), the players were found to have engaged in risky behavior, such as congregating at the hotel bar and going out to crowded restaurants.

Four days later, on July 30, several St. Louis Cardinals players tested positive for COVID-19, leading to the suspension of the team's upcoming series against the Detroit Tigers. In response to the crisis, Rob Manfred warned the MLB Players Association that the season may shut down if teams cannot control their outbreaks. However, he proceeded to inform the media with conflicting news, telling ESPN, "We are playing...The players need to be better, but I am not a quitter in general and there is no reason to quit now. We have had to be fluid, but it is manageable" (ESPN News Services, 2020). Additionally, in response to the two outbreaks, Major League Baseball decided to tighten its pandemic restrictions. Players were required to practice greater social distancing with one another to help mitigate the chance of the virus spreading across a whole team. The league also required every team to travel with a compliance officer who ensured that team staff and players adhered to the league's health and safety protocols. Meanwhile, individual teams decided to go beyond these safety protocols. For example, the Los Angeles Dodgers mandated that its players wore face coverings in the dugout despite the league not requiring them to do so (Stieb, 2020).

Fast-forwarding to the final game of the MLB season, where the Los Angeles Dodgers beat the Tampa Bays to win the World Series Championship. Dodgers third baseman Justin Turner was forced to leave the game early after finding out that he tested positive for COVID-19. However, once the Dodgers won the game, Turner returned to the field to celebrate the championship win with his teammates, which disobeyed the league's 10-day isolation policy for those who tested positive for the virus. MLB investigators found that Turner thought he had received permission from a Dodgers employee to join his teammates that night. Adding to these

findings, Manfred stated that Turner was “actively encouraged” to leave an isolation room and join his teammates, who claimed to be prepared to tolerate the additional risk of being near Turner after he tested positive (De la Fuente, 2020). Turner later issued a statement apologizing for his actions, which the commissioner applauded for setting a positive example moving forward. However, Manfred also revealed that the league could have handled the situation better by having someone stay with Turner and having him taken back to the Dodgers’ hotel sooner (De la Fuente, 2020). Luckily, the league conducted contact tracing after the game, finding no additional positive tests. While the COVID-19 pandemic is still present in the United States, sports leagues now have the information and resources needed to carry out their seasons with few outbreak issues. That being said, Major League Baseball began its 2021 season on-time with leadership anticipating the large majority of players to receive the COVID vaccine in the near future.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an external, unintentional crisis that was not caused by Major League Baseball or any of its internal stakeholders. However, throughout the majority of 2020, following the guidelines and precautions recommended by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) was crucial in mitigating the spread of the virus. The league wished to have a shortened season that would depend on its players’ and personnel’s adherence to these guidelines. Rob Manfred took immediate and decisive action in response to the several outbreaks among various teams throughout the season. However, his communication was inconsistent across channels when speaking to different stakeholders. According to Hopwood and colleagues (2012), methods of reporting crises can have an effect on how fans perceive a league. Information about bad news relating to the COVID-19 outbreaks in the league can lead to the public formulation of negative opinion regarding a given sports league. For example, by publicly stating that the baseball season

is going to happen, fans are reassured by the league's commissioner that they will be able to watch their favorite teams play despite the circumstances of the pandemic. However, when the public hears that the commissioner spoke to the Player's Association about a possible season shutdown, their opinions change as they begin to formulate a negative outlook on the baseball season continuing. Consistency and honesty are crucial characteristics of effective crisis communication, which Manfred fails to exhibit in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, when applying the organizational renewal theory posed by Ulmer et al. (2017), Major League Baseball's statement in response to Justin Turner's actions after the World Series shows that the organization was seeking to move forward from the effects of the pandemic. Manfred cited the situation as a learning opportunity for dealing with similar violations in the future. However, he chose to have a retrospective vision of the event by citing what the league should have done differently to prevent Turner from returning to the field. By not punishing Turner for his actions, Manfred's attempt for organizational renewal was a complete failure. While he communicated with the media and other MLB stakeholders about the league's response to the incident, he constructed the perception that players are now able to break COVID protocols without receiving punishment. He deemed Turner's apology for his actions as enough of an indication that the player learned from his mistake. This ineffective form of crisis communication failed in reassuring league stakeholders that MLB leadership was taking the COVID-19 pandemic seriously. Ultimately, while Manfred sought for organizational renewal following the 2020 baseball season, his statements focused on the league's many mistakes while constructing the reality of MLB leadership not taking the pandemic seriously.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Implication of Findings

The research provided above confirms the characteristics of the crisis communication tactics used across a variety of crises and scandals facing Major League Baseball. Both the steroids and Astros cheating scandals as well as the events of the COVID-19 pandemic required consistent crisis communication to be handled effectively. While crises are, by definition, unique events in the history of organizations, leadership must be prepared to properly communicate according to the requirements outlined by Ulmer and his colleagues (2017) and Coombs (2007). Leadership must communicate immediately, decisively, and honestly to control the effects of a crisis. Communicating transparently is especially important when trying to reassure external stakeholders (publics) of organizational leadership's ability to control a crisis when it occurs. Ultimately, effective crisis communication is determined by an organization's ability to address the crisis events quickly and transparency to reassure the publics that renewal is possible.

Another critical implication of the research above is that effective crisis communication helps frame a company's image in the public eye. The league's inability to address the steroids scandal immediately led publics to become wary of the organization's integrity. Meanwhile, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred's communication throughout the Astro's cheating scandal made him the target of criticism from baseball fans as well as the media covering the sport. His decision to speak out and belittle the World Series trophy, an important staple of Major League Baseball, was something that the majority of baseball fans and the players disagreed with. Finally, while MLB players and officials were not responsible for causing the COVID-19 pandemic, effective crisis communication was required for the league to successfully play a season in 2020. Manfred's inconsistent statements regarding the severity of players breaking

COVID protocols added to the general consensus among baseball fans that he is an ineffective leader and communicator.

Discussion of Hypothesis

The cases analyzed above support the hypothesis that Major League Baseball's crisis response strategies are ineffective, as they are directly related to the league's poor image in the public eye. Quick and decisive action and communication following the occurrence of a crisis are critical for effectively combatting crisis events. In both the steroids and Astros cheating scandals, MLB leadership failed to respond quickly when they first became aware of each respective crisis' occurrence. The steroids scandal lasted for almost two decades due to MLB leadership's failure to properly address the crisis when it began in the early 1990's. While the Astros cheating scandal only lasted for a few years, the league failed to respond to the allegations submitted by various teams when the cheating was first being noticed in 2017. Transparent and honest communication is also important for ensuring effective crisis communication practices. The league's leadership lacked transparency when communicating its insight into the Astros cheating scandal. While various media sources found the team's upper level-management to be responsible for the scandal, the league continued to claim that the players and coaches were the only parties involved. This dishonesty and lack of transparency frames the situation in a way that shifts the blame from the responsible parties, which creates uncertainty for who should be held accountable for the crisis events and prevents organizational renewal from occurring. Finally, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred's lack of consistency in his statements regarding the league's COVID-19 protocols encompasses ineffective crisis communication. While he condemned the teams that had players violating league protocols when the season first started, he chose to brush

off the actions of a player who broke those same protocols during the World Series. These actions made the league's publics doubt that he was truly taking the pandemic seriously.

Furthermore, the ineffectiveness of the league's crisis communication strategies presented by the cases mentioned above is correlated with MLB's decreasing popularity in the public eye. The actions taken throughout the steroids scandal decreased the integrity of the game in the eyes of fans, making them become wary of the sport in general. Meanwhile, the league's handling of the Astros cheating scandal and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to even lower approval ratings for Commissioner Rob Manfred. There are several issues facing the game of baseball, such as its slow pace of play, that have led to its declining popularity over the past couple of years. However, each commissioner's ineffective crisis communication practices have certainly led fans to lose confidence in the integrity of the sport as well as Major League Baseball's leadership. With the research hypothesis confirmed, this project seeks to conclude with a discussion of how the failures presented by the cases above can be used to incite more effective crisis communication practices in the future.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Recommendations

The theoretical framework described above represents the general characteristics of successful crisis communication. This research project concludes with a description of effective practices to be used by Major League Baseball to combat crises in the future. One of the major factors contributing to the longevity of the various crises discussed above was MLB's failure to address each crisis quickly and decisively. Its delayed communication and actions taken following the occurrence of the steroids scandal allowed players to continue using PEDs for

more than a decade without any discipline or punishment. Therefore, a key recommendation that comes from the analysis above is that the league formally addresses a crisis the moment it realizes its occurrence. This strategy can be applied to all cheating scandals, as well as national crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Once the league finds out about a specific crisis, its leadership must immediately take the necessary steps to address the crisis with clear and honest communication. This will reassure the league's stakeholders that it truly cares about maintaining a high organizational integrity rather than avoiding problems until they are exposed by outside sources such as the media.

Additionally, MLB leadership must follow honest and transparent communication in dealing with future crises. This strategy goes hand-in-hand with the immediate action outlined above, since the league can only be honest and transparent with its stakeholders by immediately sharing everything that it knows about a given crisis event. Its failure to do so throughout the Astros cheating scandal led fans to lose confidence in MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred's leadership capabilities. Once again, this strategy can be applied to crises and scandals of all types facing the league in the future. Major League Baseball must be honest and transparent with its stakeholders throughout the duration of a crisis event. Whether it is keeping the media and public updated about the league's findings in regard to an investigation, or simply sharing the occurrence of a crisis rather than denying it, MLB can improve its reputation in the public eye by communicating honestly and transparently in times of crisis.

Furthermore, Major League Baseball must remain consistent in its handling of a given crisis event. This failure was particularly present throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as outlined above. Commissioner Rob Manfred's condemnation of certain teams' practices at the start of the 2020 season does not align with the statements he made following Justin Turner's

actions after the World Series. In order to reassure stakeholders that a crisis is being handled properly, organizational leadership must maintain a consistent stance in its communication regarding the crisis events. This strategy can be applied to all crises and scandals facing the league in the future. Establishing strict rules and necessary punishments throughout a crisis can raise stakeholders' confidence in the league's ability to effectively handle a given crisis.

By following the recommendations outlined above, Major League Baseball can achieve organizational renewal when combatting various crises in the future. This renewal is crucial for not only ensuring a functioning organization, but also improving MLB's public image with the assurance of effective leadership and fostering a sport with the highest integrity possible.

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Appendix

Office of the Commissioner
MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

1.20



FRANCIS T. UNGER, Jr.
Commissioner

June 7, 1991

TO: ALL MAJOR LEAGUE CLUBS

RE: BASEBALL'S DRUG POLICY AND PREVENTION PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

This memorandum sets forth Baseball's drug policy and the principal components of our drug abuse program. As in the past, the health and welfare of those who work in Baseball will continue to be our paramount concern. No less compelling, however, is the need to maintain the integrity of the game. Drug involvement or the suspicion of drug involvement is inconsistent with maintaining these objectives.

The basic drug policy for the game is simply stated: There is no place for illegal drug use in Baseball. The use of illegal drugs by players, umpires, owners, front office, League or Commissioner's office personnel, trainers or anyone else involved in the game cannot be condoned or tolerated. Illegal drug use can cause injuries on the field, diminished job performance and alienation of those on whom the game's success depends - Baseball fans. Baseball players and personnel cannot be permitted to give even the slightest suggestion that illegal drug use is either acceptable or safe. It is the responsibility of all Baseball players and personnel to see that the use of illegal drugs does not occur, or if it does to put a stop to it by the most effective means possible.

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL'S DRUG POLICY

The possession, sale or use of any illegal drug or controlled substance by Major League players and personnel is strictly prohibited. Major League players or personnel involved in the possession, sale or use of any illegal drug or controlled substance are subject to discipline by the Commissioner and risk permanent expulsion from the game. In addition to any discipline this office may impose, a Club also may take action under

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applicable provisions of and special covenants to the Uniform Player's Contract.

This prohibition applies to all illegal drugs and controlled substances, including steroids or prescription drugs for which the individual in possession of the drug does not have a prescription. Clubs will dispense prescription drugs only under the direction of the team physician and appropriate records of such distribution and use will be maintained. All drugs on Club premises will be kept under lock and key. During spring training, the championship season, League Championships or the World Series, any player who is taking any prescription drug under the direction of any physician other than the team physician must notify the team physician of this fact and of the drug(s) prescribed.

Major League Baseball recognizes that illegal drug use has become a national problem, and that some players and Baseball personnel may fall victim to drugs. In such circumstances, Baseball will attempt to treat and rehabilitate individuals with a drug problem through a Club's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or through resources identified by the Commissioner's Office. Baseball will approach its treatment and rehabilitation efforts with the welfare of both the individual and the game foremost in mind. However, Baseball will not hesitate to permanently remove from the game those players and personnel who, despite our efforts to treat and rehabilitate, refuse to accept responsibility for the problem and continue to use illegal drugs. Finally, the concern of an individual Club about a player's availability to that Club will not be a meaningful consideration in determining the course to be followed. If any Club covers up or otherwise fails to disclose to this office any information concerning drug use by a player, that Club will be fined \$250,000, the highest allowable amount under the Major League Agreement.