

## The collapse of Oxfam's reputation poses an existential threat to the charity

June 14, 2019 by Jonathan Hemus

The Charity Commission's report into allegations of sexual misconduct by Oxfam staff concluded that a key driver for its failure to be sufficiently "full and frank" about the allegations was "influenced by a desire to protect Oxfam GB's reputation".

Opinion



If that is indeed the case, its reputation protection strategy can only be described as an unmitigated disaster.

The scandal impacts not just Oxfam's good name but also its future viability, as evidenced by the cancellation of direct debits by thousands of its regular donors and the loss of UK government aid.

This is a stark reminder that crises stemming from cultural and behavioural issues have a power to pose an existential threat to an organisation, which is rarely the case with an operational crisis such as a major accident or a cyber-incident.

When compared with a typical organisation, the potential harm to Oxfam is further multiplied due to the nature of its work.

When your purpose is to provide care and support to victims of disaster, being seen to turn a blind eye to allegations of abuse of the very same people is guaranteed to destroy confidence and trust.

The allegations against Oxfam are particularly shocking because they strike right at the heart of what the charity stands for.

And crises which expose values as simply words on a website rather than the reality of how an organisation behaves are always the most damaging of all.

Critically, the Charity Commission's report reveals a culture which allowed misconduct to continue, despite warnings.

Effective reputation protection begins with creating a crisis-resistant culture, one in which deeply held values guide behaviour, whistle blowing is encouraged, allegations are taken seriously and swift action is taken against transgressors, however senior they are.

There can be no doubt that Oxfam faces a grave challenge to re-build its reputation and the confidence of its stakeholders.

It will be a long journey – many years – to fully regain trust and it relies upon strong, courageous leadership from its new senior team.

A commitment to always act in line with its values, the creation of a new crisis-resistant culture and a willingness to address misbehaviour quickly and thoroughly must be the starting point for its recovery.

Most important of all, Oxfam must reject the notion that its reputation can be protected by keeping its head down when there's a whiff of trouble and instead adopt a policy of full and frank disclosure.

During difficult times, transparent communication can be inconvenient and painful and the temptation is to take a more expedient approach.

It is a temptation that Oxfam must resist at all costs or else risk losing not just its good name but its very existence.

**Jonathan Hemus is managing director of Insignia**

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