The Rogue Employee Meets the Asiana Crash

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With all eyes on the July 6 crash of Asiana Flight 214 at San Francisco International Airport that tragically claimed the lives of three young girls, the Rogue Employee strikes again. But not at Asiana Airlines.

If you missed my column on what constitutes a Rogue Employee — that single, lone wolf that conveniently acts "completely contrary" to Mom, Apple pie, and the company's Code of Conduct—let's review: Companies in trouble almost always blame the Rogue Employee; it is almost never the fault of a Rogue Employee. Yet amazingly most companies embroiled in a scandal appear to be able to pin any misconduct on the proverbial Rogue Employee within hours of the first Twitter headlines (faster than a PR manager can say "Crisis Management").

Former prosecutor and investigations expert James McGrath of McGrath & Grace has commented on the company's post-crash response in his column "Asiana Airlines Doesn't Claim It's Raining in San Francisco." According to McGrath, in defiance of the conventional wisdom ladled out by The PR Wizards of Smart, Asiana Airlines decided to investigate first and name names later. He points out that the airline's president and his executive team bowed deeply in apology during the company's after-crash press conference rather than going for the easy Rogue Employee excuse. He goes on to report on the hordes of employees dedicated by the airline to manage the aftermath of the crash. When asked about the Company's failure to hire PR help in the U.S., McGrath cites the response from an Asiana representative in Korea: "It's not the proper time to manage the company's image."

This evidently didn't sit well with said PR Wizards, who chided the company for its slow response (and undoubtedly its failure to comprehend the dire need to hire a high-priced U.S. PR firm). Certainly as facts emerge, the company will need to come to a conclusion and will want to advocate for why consumers and shareholders should continue to trust the airline. But, so far, Asiana merits props for not taking the easy Rogue Employee way out.

But lest you think Asiana's refreshingly responsible approach might possibly be a harbinger of a new era of corporate accountability, never fear: enter the National Transportation Safety Bureau (NTSB) and San Francisco Bay area TV station KTVU. We now know that someone at either KTVU or the NTSB decided to come up with some racially offensive prank names for the pilots of the crashed airliner (so stupid and offensive I won't repeat them here). Through a series of errors, this led to a TV anchor at San Francisco Bay area station KTVU reading those bogus names aloud on the air, a sound bite that quickly went viral.

Amidst the hail of ensuing protests and outrage, both the station and the NTSB apologized, somehow laying all the blame at the foot of a hapless NTSB summer intern who, acting "outside his authority," "confirmed" a list of the fake pilot names over the phone to the TV station. (And now, here come the lawsuits.)

Here's the official NTSB statement, straight out of the Rogue Employee Excuse Handbook:

"The National Transportation Safety Board apologizes for inaccurate and offensive names that were mistakenly confirmed as those of the pilots of Asiana flight 214, which crashed at San Francisco International Airport on July 6. Earlier today, in response to an inquiry from a media outlet, a summer intern acted outside the scope of his authority when he erroneously confirmed the names of the flight crew on the aircraft."

For its apology, TV station KTVU confessed that "during our phone call to the NTSB where the person confirmed the spellings of the names, we never asked that person to give us their position with the agency."
Ah yes, the summer intern. Summer intern, meet underside of bus. The summer intern is the new Rogue Employee! And via a cursory review of recent media headlines, the Rogue Employee excuse seems to be working, with the "summer intern" blame being mindlessly repeated by the so-called "journalists" of the realm.

But which NTSB or KTVU employee wrote the list? Which actual employee or employees got a good belly laugh coming up with fake racially offensive pilot names after a tragedy that killed three young Chinese students on their way to a three-week church camp? And which NTSB or KTVU supervisor is responsible for the culture that supports this kind of idiotic activity? Clearly, from the careful use of the work "confirmed" by both the NTSB and KTVU, I think we can safely exclude one person: the NTSB summer intern. (Sigh. Journalists, do your jobs.)

I'll say it again: it's almost never the Rogue Employee's fault. Any company spokesperson or PR Wizard of Smart that goes out with the Rogue Employee excuse better be ready to defend it.

Donna Boehme is an internationally recognized authority and practitioner in the field of organizational compliance and ethics, designing and managing compliance and ethics solutions within the U.S. and worldwide. As principal of Compliance Strategists LLC, Boehme is the former group compliance and ethics officer for two leading multinationals and currently advises a wide spectrum of private, public, governmental, academic, and nonprofit entities through her NJ-based consulting firm. She was named by ComplianceX to its list of "Who Compliance Professionals Should Follow on Twitter in 2013," so follow her on Twitter @DonnaCBoehme.

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