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IN My OPINION

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For the love of baseball, tell the truth.

Oh, for the love of the game. I am a baseball fan and do love my Colorado Rockies, especially. What I'm not loving is the unraveling of the most recent MLB cheating scandal with the Houston Astros. This isn't a blog about baseball. I wish I could tell you I know all the intricacies of the game, the politics, the leadership. I don't. I just love baseball. But I do know PR, and I also have done my fair share of crisis communications, albeit not for an MLB team. In my view, the foundational PR principles remain the same, however, whatever the situation.

Tell the truth. Tell it first. Tell your story.

Unfortunately, the Astros just didn't seem to see it that way. During their recent press conferences, the players were exonerated for coming forward and offered little to nothing to rebuild trust among their fan base. The trite "we're sorry" player statements followed by quick exits weren't believable and did nothing to quell anger, establish trust or even offer some rationale besides "we'll do anything to win" and now, "get out of suffering any consequences." The owner believes he's above accountability and that pointing fingers in every direction but the mirror will make him look less guilty. Pretending you had no knowledge is as bad as the rest of the accusations. It's been my experience that the top almost always knows and turned a blind eye in situations like these, at least until they are outed. The real remorse is that they were caught, not that they deliberately beat the system.

I'm not sure what PR counsel they received, although it has been noted they met with a crisis PR team before making their statements. As a long-time practicing professional, I find it hard to believe they advised to deflect and defend rather than genuinely apologize and offer a bridge to build trust again. Mr. Crane missed the boat multiple times to do just that. He missed it in his tone of delivery, which was mechanical and forced. He missed it in the words stated (and if the PR folks prepared those, shame on them) and he missed it when he said he shouldn't be accountable. Wow.

When times are tough, true leaders step up. It may be hard. It might be unpleasant and might even be incredibly difficult to accept or own. But a good leader does it anyway. That's how you begin to build trust again. Own it. Tell the truth as much as it may hurt. Tell it before anyone else in your words. Keyword there: YOUR. People want the apology and acknowledgement to be genuine. When you're not, people see right through it and that's what happened with Mr. Crane and his players.



There's an ethical factor here that seems many have overlooked. Cheating is unethical, in all things. It isn't just "breaking some of the rules." The fact that this behavior is being overlooked by the highest person in the organization (along with the Commissioner if you read some articles being bantered about) and his waffling statements back and forth about whether it affected games speaks to a systemic issue. That's one PR problem that will not go away anytime soon. The press conference was the time to specifically note how the Astros organization would ensure this wouldn't ever happen again, not lip service. How they would keep players in check. How they would rise to this challenge and overcome it in a way to make their fans, the MLB proud. That just didn't happen.

How this scandal is managed in the next few weeks, and it likely will be all of that and more given we've just entered into the Spring Training season, will tell how much of a trust gap exists for this team and MLB in general. That's the tough part, the rest of the league will suffer at some level because of this, too. How can they retain trust with their fan bases? How can they engage in ways that will elevate America's pastime? No doubt some strategy sessions are taking place right now to answer those questions.

As much as the Astros want to move on, and I do believe they have the right to, they need to own the problem, address how they are changing the mindset internally (beyond firing two people who supposedly had no involvement) and returning to the core values of the game, competition and sportsmanlike behavior. That's going to take some time. In my opinion, it's going to take telling the truth with some real and visible action, not dodging an inside pitch.