

From a Blizzard to an Avalanche: Responding to a Corporate Culture of Abuse

As the twenty-first century continues, technology continues to shape how people and organizations communicate and create shared understandings of reality. With digital communication mediums such as social media and journalism the lines isolating organizations and publics will continue to fade; and the concept and process of “participatory culture” demonstrates how public engagement with organizations can affect organizational policies. (Jenkins and Scott xxii) In the past when corporate organizations behave in a way that is contrary to the public interest and created a public relations crisis, skilled strategic communication offered these organizations the power to shape public opinion, create and control narratives through brute force messaging through controlled channels, and minimize damage and accountability to the organization.

But what happens when technology levels the playing field between the publics and the organization? When faced with public relations crisis that brings to light severe organizational abuses, how should organizations respond? This work will examine the case of Activision-Blizzard, a game developer based in Irvine, CA known for some of the biggest titles in the gaming industry such as “World of Warcraft”, who is facing a lawsuit from the State of California alleging widespread harassment, abuse, and discrimination; This examination will include some of the internal and external corporate responses from Activision-Blizzard and how it has been perceived by publics outside the organization, as well as offer a better strategy for organizations facing crises of employee and public relations.

Summary of CA Department of Fair Employment and Housing vs. Activision Blizzard, et al.

On July 20, 2021 the State of California filed a lawsuit in the Los Angeles County Superior Court against Activision-Blizzard and ten unnamed defendants charging them with gender and racial discrimination when it came to pay and advancement opportunities (CA Superior Court 8); cultivating a “frat-boy culture” that enabled unchecked sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace that resulted

in one instance a female employee committing suicide during a business trip where her male supervisor had carried butt plugs and lubricant with him (4-5). The lawsuit continues to allege that any attempts by employees to resolve issues were treated dismissively by management and names Blizzard CEO Jay Allen Brack for specifically failing to respond; and that the Human Resources department was perceived as untrustworthy and violated employee confidentiality leaving female employees subject to retaliation by management when it came to project assignments, raises, and being first to be targeted for termination (5). On August 23, 2021, the State of California amended their lawsuit to include additional charge against Activision-Blizzard for willfully interfering with the state investigation by destroying organizational documents necessary for the investigation, and forcing works to speak with WinterHale, an outside law firm hired by the organization to investigate the issues before speaking to state investigators (Axios).

Organizational Responses from Activision Blizzard

The initial press release from Activision-Blizzard's public relations department on August 21, 2021, described the allegations as distorted or false claims and accused California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing actions as "irresponsible behavior from unaccountable State bureaucrats" (qtd. in Plunkett). Public relations are defined as a discipline of building and maintaining relationships between organizations and their publics (PRSA), and government entities are included as a public that public relations specialists should be invested in managing relationships with. This hostile and accusatory response to an organization to an organization that exists to work for the benefit of the public good reflects very poorly on Activision-Blizzard as an organization and demonstrates a lack of professionalism and maturity which gives even more credibility to the State's claims that the company has a hostile and unprofessional "frat-boy" culture that is cultivated and protected by the management.

Interestingly, two days later there would be two internal communications to all Activision-Blizzard employees from two executive officers: CEO Jay Allen Brack and executive Fran Townsend, both with very different tones in their responses. Brack's response to the allegations was conciliatory, expressing that the allegations were "extremely troubling", and aside from a bizarre attempt to build credibility for himself as someone concerned with social justice by referring to feminist activist Gloria Steinem as the "patron saint of the Brack household" (Brack qtd. in Schrier), the response was overall typical of "PR speak", in other words, full of words with little substance. But the truthfulness of his virtue signaling is questionable when the publicly available documents of the lawsuit name him specifically as an organizational representative who failed to act when presented with issues.

Not long after Brack's post, VP Frances Townsend would send out an internal message to employees as well with a completely different tone of response that openly rejected the DFEH's suit as "factually old, incorrect, and out of context stories, some more than a decade ago", and "meritless and irresponsible" (Townsend qtd. in Schrier). These responses are from high level management people and presumably have been vetted in some way by their public relations and legal departments; but they're dramatically different in how they respond to the people of the State of California via the government's criticism of their organizational abuses – and it is quite telling. If one executive is saying "There is a problem and we need to address it" and the other is saying "There is no problem here and they're wrong", then someone is lying about the true attitudes within Activision -Blizzard's management. Given that the lawsuit and the amendment to the lawsuit document repeated attempted by Activision-Blizzard to obstruct the investigation, it would seem to be clear that the organization shares Townsend's attitude and will refuse to make any meaningful changes to how the organization is run. This deception in communication will result in a profound loss of trust, respect, and goodwill for the organization and its employees, even for those employees who are irrelevant to the case and are just trying to hold down a job. The management team made a mistake in assuming that internal communications would stay

internal and never see public scrutiny but in the age of digital communication and social media, one must assume any sort of message will reach mass audiences despite its intent. The public has a vested interest in how companies are run because they are also participants in those companies. It is no longer sufficient for organizations to evade public scrutiny with silver tongued statements, it must be backed by observable decisive action.

Meaningfully Addressing Toxic Corporate Culture

The DFEH's argument that the organization enabled the cultivation of a toxic work environment and "frat-boy culture" (CA Superior Court 4), is supported by the numerous instances where employees attempted to resolve issues through the company's human resources department only to find themselves being treated dismissively or retaliated against by management; leading to a breakdown of trust and respect into the organization's ability and desire to adhere to professional standards (5). If the human resources department is failing to meet the needs of its employees, then the organization has a fundamental problem in its ability to effectively function.

The field of Human resources management (HRM) was developed in the early 20th century as a challenge to traditional organizational mindsets of seeing organizations as machines and people as replaceable cogs; HRM instead sees that employees are valuable contributors to organizations and must be included in the processes of the organization and supported in a way so that their labor feels meaningful and fulfilling (Hang 6). In large corporations like Activision Blizzard the management team play a large role in creating and maintaining corporate culture; By creating and enforcing policies that determine what is allowed and isn't allowed, it creates its identity and culture and recreates itself daily (Taylor). Activision Blizzard's inability or unwillingness to create and maintain an environment that is conducive to valuing professionalism and respect within the organization is a failure in leadership.

Remedying this breakdown of trust and respect within the organization requires that human resource professionals and executive leadership take to heart that people are the most vital and valuable resource in an organization and that investing in the safety and well-being of employees is the best way to cultivate dedicated, loyal, passionate, and inspired workers that will pay off in dividends. These types of changes cannot be done by forcing low-level employees to do diversity training seminars or diversifying the workforce for diversification's sake; These are philosophical and policy changes that need to be done at the management and executive levels that value long term investment, fostering growth, addressing conflict and hostility, and taking responsibility and accountability. Simple changes that could be done in Activision Blizzard's case is to discourage or punish intoxication in the workplace, and to take complaints of abuse and discrimination seriously. For an organization's leadership to be legitimate and trustworthy it must act with consistency, fairness, and integrity. Human resource departments must hold all employees accountable to their actions and should not be shielding toxic employees and leaving others vulnerable for abuse. If the health of the organization is the primary focus for human resource management, then it is the ethical and practical decision to hold people in positions of power every bit as accountable as lower-level employee. With the democratizing power of the internet for employees and outside interested publics to bring issues to light and to hold organizations accountable, only once an organization can demonstrate and redemonstrate the desire and practice to cultivate a better environment can it rebuild trust and respect among its internal and external publics.

Conclusion

Blizzard Entertainment was once a company that was beloved by millions of gamers and a force of nature in the gaming industry; many children who grew up playing their games dreamed of working

there and would go to school to study software engineering, art, writing, and music to eventually be hired at their dream jobs. Unfortunately for some of these people their dreams turned to nightmares when they were victim to an organization rife with abuse and corruption. Whether this developed over time since its acquisition by Activision or it has always been a part of the company since day one is still a developing story; but it is a story that is repeated over and over across businesses and industries.

Though this work focuses on one instance of how an organization responds to allegations of its systemic abuse and neglect of employees without enacting any truly meaningful change, similar patterns are seen across many industries. The old strategies of trying to use strategic communication to do damage control and deflect are no longer effective in an era where narratives can be challenged; it is time for organizations to use the opportunities that public accountability present to identify, negotiate, and eliminate problems that threaten to harm employees as well as the organizations they belong to. Human resource departments have a common perception that they “work for the company, not you”, implying a belief that HR is either ambivalent or antagonistic to employees; but it is employees that make the company itself. If a company doesn’t protect and invest in the people within it, how could it survive?

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Lecture.