

Case Study- Mouse in the Salad

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Consider the following questions.

1. Initially, when the mouse incident happened, Le Pain Quotidien considered abandoning organic produce for conventionally grown produce. Even if the company had made that change, would that have eliminated the possibility of a mouse appearing in another customer's salad? Why or why not? Are fields the only place in the farm-to-restaurant process at which a mouse could have gotten into the greens? Why do you think that this "solution" was given the attention it was given? What other solutions may have warranted more attention?

Does this point to a bigger problem of not seeing the entire system in which things are produced or created, but instead isolating a single aspect of the process and focusing on that? What is the danger in this kind of isolated thinking? Can you cite examples of this kind of thinking that have occurred in other corporate crisis situations? How have they played out?

Let's say the company had decided to forgo organic and begin getting its produce from conventional suppliers who use pesticides and insecticides. What damage could have resulted from this action? When does it make PR sense to completely change your business plan because of a single adverse incident and when does it not make sense? Give examples to support your answer.

2. Though mindfulness, or the lack thereof, was not mentioned as a factor in this incident, can you see how it might just be the most crucial element in the story? Focusing only on the restaurant component of the supply chain, consider each of the following people involved in seeing that the salad was delivered to the customer's table.

Were the workers who unloaded the crates of greens from the truck mindful of the fact that they needed to cover the crates to prevent rodent intrusion? If the lettuce was already bagged and/or shredded upon delivery, was the worker who put the bags in the refrigerator unit mindful of the weight and color of the clear plastic bags as he handled them? If he had been, wouldn't he have noticed an oddly colored blotch in one of the bags—something that was not green? Wouldn't he have noticed that the

weight of one of the bags was heavier than the others—since a mouse is denser than an equal volume of lettuce?

What about the chef's assistant who prepared the salad? A mouse would take up a good portion of a plate. How could the assistant have been so completely "out to lunch" that s/he didn't notice the mouse? Le Pain Quotidien seems like a fairly decent restaurant. It's doubtful that the salad consisted of just a bunch of lettuce on a plate.

The assistant might have spent a minute or more preparing the salad. How could s/he have not seen the color of the mouse or felt its texture or in general noticed that something was different about this salad? After all, this employee had probably made scores, if not hundreds, of the same salad many times before.

On the other hand, if the chef's assistant was new to the job, what about the lack of mindfulness of the person who checked the assistant's work before it went to the waitperson?

Lastly, the waitress or waiter. Here is a person who carries food all day, every day. The same dishes. This person too is not being mindful. Didn't something feel amiss with that plate?

Not only is this the unstated problem at the heart of the whole crisis—a problem that could have been stopped at so many points along the way—but it is perhaps the biggest problem we face as a society. No one is paying attention, we aren't listening to each other, everyone is somewhere else and not focused on what is directly in front of him or her. How, in short, can a society continue to function when everyone is "out to lunch"?

What can be done in a workplace to bring employees back to the here and now? How can you get people to focus on what is right in front of them instead of thinking about what they did two days or two minutes ago or what they're going to do two hours or two years from now? Lest you think this is an airy-fairy idea, just stop and consider how the simple act of mindfulness could have saved so many people at Le Pain Quotidien a mountain of grief, expense and time.

Can you think of other crisis situations that, at their heart, would have been prevented by mindfulness? What about the BP oil disaster? The Challenger disaster? What about the housing and subprime mortgage crises? I'm sure you can come up with many others. In each of these cases, give the titles of people or the exact names of people who might have averted disaster or a serious crisis had they been more mindful of their workplace and their duties.

3. In the Le Pain Quotidien case, the PR people were scared of talking with the press. The journalist was persistent, yet no one would respond to his phoned and emailed requests for an interview. In this classroom, you are taught that this is definitely not the way to handle a crisis situation: Clam up. Avoid the media. If you ignore the problem,

perhaps it will go away. Why do you think that the PR people refused to talk with or even email the Freakonomics journalist? Isn't this one of the primary roles of PR professionals—to interact with the media? Why then do PR professionals so often shirk this duty?

And this avoidance of journalists does not just occur in crisis situations. A friend of mine was writing an article for Westways (Triple A's membership magazine in Southern California) and was utterly frustrated by PR people who didn't return calls or emails. This was a friendly article in which the writer wished to update and/or confirm airline and hotel policies regarding travelers with disabilities. After weeks of leaving messages and sending emails, this writer had to write her article without input from top companies that supposedly employed top PR people.

4. When CEO Vincent Herbert was first informed as to the mouse-in-the-salad crisis, he was put off by how “corporate” and lacking in emotion his subordinates' (PR professionals') presentation of the crisis was. Consider his comments carefully. I mean, isn't a mouse in your salad as visceral an experience as one would wish to talk about in polite company? Why then is it discussed so clinically at a corporate level? Doesn't this tend to “sanitize” the issue and thereby remove it from reality? Why do you believe that public relations and corporate culture in general tend to distance themselves from human emotion, particularly the emotional outlook and concerns of their customers?

In the end, doesn't this kind of emotional distancing tend to foster distrust of corporations and the public relations field? After all, who would be satisfied with an apology that is robotic, devoid of emotion?

5. Consider the following players in the mouse crisis. What emotional intelligence competencies did each display and which were sorely lacking?

- * the reporter
- * the customer who found the mouse in her salad
- * the CEO
- * the PR professionals
- * the kitchen and wait staff