

teaching note

Air Transport Service Harm Crisis: The case of Helios Airways tragedy

Summary

This case study aims to generate classroom discussion of how important it is in high risk service industries, such as airlines, to pay extreme attention to the preconditions that can result to potential failures and furthermore, to organizational crises. Although preparation is crucial in managing such crises and mitigates their impacts, it is not enough in these high risk services organizations to be prepared for potential crises. They have to undertake all the necessary actions in order to eliminate as much as possible these threatening situations. In particular, this case study presents the well known case of Helios Airways flight HCY 522 crash in Athens area, Greece, during August 2005, which not only resulted in the death of 121 people, but also it cost the existence of the airline itself. It presents the accident and some important aspects of the company's unsuccessful effort to deal with the crisis, in order to present mistakes that should be avoided in such situations. Finally, the paper offers conclusions and discussion questions.

Teaching objectives and Learning outcomes

This case study aims to stimulate classroom discussion on how failure interaction among human, organizational and technological factors, in high risk service industries, along with unsuccessful crisis management choices, can cost the existence of the organization itself. The case study particularly aims to: (1) define briefly the concept of service harm crises, (2) present some basic tactics of crisis management and communication (3) present the facts of the accident - as they are given by the report of the responsible committee - and the interaction of several factors resulted directly or indirectly to the accident, and (4) present and assess some aspects of the company's actions and omissions in order to deal with the unexpected crisis event, (5) discuss how sensitive the high risk service organizations are to potential crises and thus stimulate their managers' attention to prevent and be prepared for such situations.

By studying and discussing this case study, students should be able to:

- Define a service harm crisis.
- Describe the 4R's that can apply as a first response tactic.
- Describe the different options that organizations have when communicating during crisis.
- Give useful examples of potential causes of the Swish cheese effect in companies involved in the tourism and travel industry.
- Provide recommendations on how service harm crises can be eliminated or reduced in such companies.
- Provide recommendations on what crisis communication tactics tourism and travel companies should apply when facing

serious crises (i.e. with human victims).

- Discuss the role of training in averting and managing service harm crises and their preconditions.

Target audience

Target audiences for this case study include undergraduate and graduate students who study hospitality management, services management, and crisis or risk management. This case study may be used in industry or company workshops with managers and employees involved in the tourism and travel industry.

Teaching strategy and approach

Preparation prior to Class

Prior to class, students should be asked to read the whole case study. After having read it, students should be able to discuss the following questions/topics:

- Describe the case study.
- Define a service harm crisis.
- Describe the crisis communication tactics options that an organization in crisis has.
- Provide evidence about how service harm crises are in the tourism and the travel industry.
- Explain the actual causes of service harm crises in the tourism and the travel industry.
- Discuss the importance of managers' training towards this approach.

Class Instruction (150 minutes teaching time)

Phase I: Introduction (25 minutes)

- Introduction and learning outcomes (10 minutes).
- Asking students to share their personal knowledge of cases of product or service harm crises first in general, and then particularly in tourism and travel industry (15 minutes).

Phase II: Open Case Study Discussion and Fact Analysis (60 Minutes)

- An open discussion on the case study. What happened and why? (15 minutes).
- In order for the students to have a more complete view of the facts, the following video on line could be shown (about 45 minutes) (it consists of 5 parts):

Air Crash Investigation—(Helios 522)

- Part1 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWJzgljoJ7A
- Part2 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=7v1JQRu-gGI
- Part3 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASfctWYc6k0
- Part4 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2FfWhW-qRc
- Part5 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGWgzB-ceD0

Phase III: Discussion on Service Harm Crises (35 minutes)

- Students can be separated into groups of 3-4 persons. Each group can be asked to prepare answers for the following topics:
 - Define a service harm crisis in the tourism and travel industry.
 - Provide evidence of how widespread service harm crises in the tourism and travel industry are.
 - Discuss the consequences of the service harm crises in the tourism and travel industry, locally and globally.
 - Explain potential sources of a possible tourism service harm crises.
 - Provide recommendations on how tourism services harm crises can be eliminated or reduced, and if it is not possible, how they can be managed more effectively.
 - Discuss the role of training in managing such situations and their preconditions.
 - Provide recommendations on crisis communication tactics that could be adopted by tourism businesses regarding some examples of service harm crises (i.e. food poisoning in the hotel restaurant, drowning incident in hotel pool etc).
- Depending on the number of students participating in the class, each group can be assigned one or two of the above topics and prepare the answer for about 15 minutes. After that, a general class discussion of 15-20 minutes can follow, covering all these topics.

Phase IV: Closure (30 minutes)

- Offer a short lecture with participation on service harm crises, the Swiss cheese effect and the crisis communication tactics, by using the brief literature review that exists in the case study.
- Summarize key issues and concepts covered during the session.
- Have a Q&A session including discussion on possible test questions.