

HOW TO MANAGE THE REPUTATION OF YOUR BUSINESS DURING THE PANDEMIC

BY WILLIAM S. HARVEY

Reputation is an invaluable intangible asset that impacts on how your staff, customers and other key stakeholders perceive your organisation. This is not superficial because reputation influences the behaviour of others and therefore the resilience, performance and future trajectory of your business.

Below are eight questions to help guide your thinking around how to manage the reputation of your business during a time of crisis.

1 How are you showing **compassion**? Consider how are you demonstrating psychological support for your staff, customers and other stakeholders who will be juggling their work commitments with child care, parental care, voluntary commitments and/or their own personal challenges.

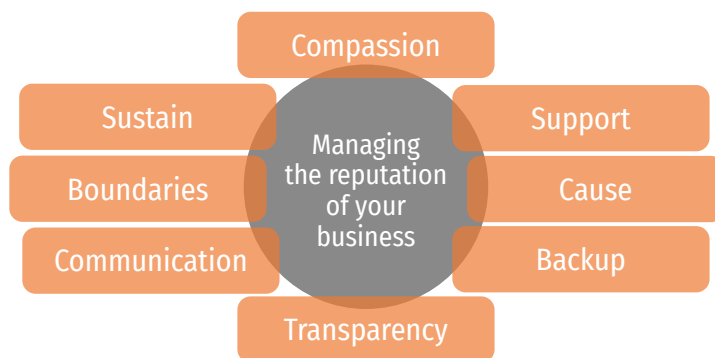
2 What are you doing to **support**? The help other people need will vary significantly, from time away from the workplace to financial support and social connectivity. Considering how your organisation decides to support others in times of need is not only the right thing to do, but is also likely to be reciprocated in the long-run.

3 How are you helping the **cause**? We are witnessing so many ways that organisations can support the pandemic, from Formula 1

companies helping with ventilator shortages, to beverage companies producing alcohol gels. Libraries Unlimited, where I am Chair of the Board, now enables residents of Devon who cannot physically travel to libraries to sign-up for a library card online and have free access to a greater volume of e-books and audio books.

4 Where are the **backups**? In the same way that succession and replacement planning is expected for the Chief Executive, it is essential that there is clarity in advance for all critical roles within your organisation. Do you have a plan for who is in charge when different people are absent? A clear plan ensures that effective decisions are made proactively rather than haphazardly.

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5 How **transparent** are you? It is often assumed that full transparency is the utopia, but as most leaders know this is not practical, desirable, or ethical. Nevertheless, it is essential to be frank and open with staff around their job prospects and with funders and investors about the future scenarios of your business in the short- and medium-term. It takes courage to be open with others and although this will bring anxiety and nervousness, it is more desirable than silence or glossing over the reality, which will not garner respect and goodwill from others in the long-term.

6 What and when are you **communicating**? It is essential to communicate with your key stakeholders. This gives them reassurance that you are aware of the issues at stake, you are working through them and you are giving them information to process and respond to. Think carefully about how much information you really need to provide, otherwise it is too much for people to absorb, especially given the saturation of public information already available. Bear in mind that most people's work days are already blurring into their evenings, weekends and holidays so be mindful and respectful of when is most appropriate to send your messages.

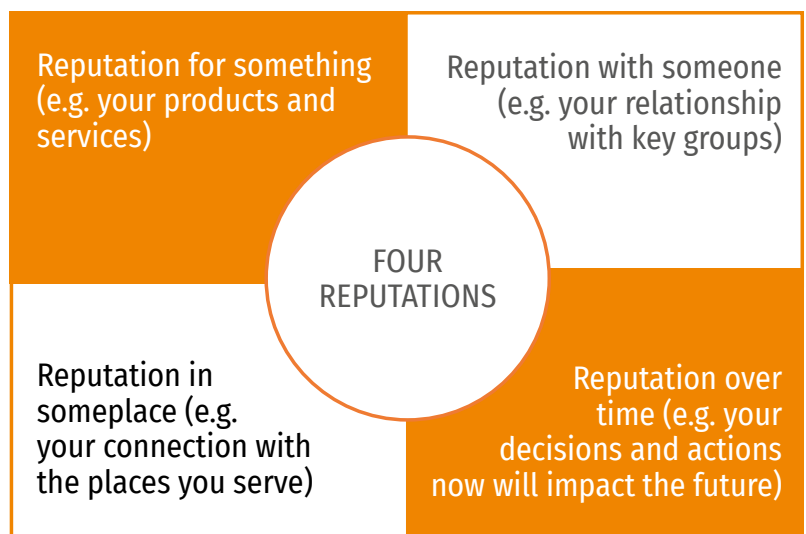
7 How are you managing **work-life boundaries**? Most people are needing to work intensively to sustain business activity and/or pivot into new areas of opportunity. Key workers are rightly celebrated for the immense sacrifice, hard work and contribution they are providing, and there are many others who are working all hours of the day and night in support of their business. Remember that this cannot be sustained indefinitely so actively encourage people to step away. The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Exeter, where I am employed, introduced two rest days after the Easter weekend to encourage staff to take additional days of leave for rest and recuperation.

8 What are you doing to **sustain** professional relationships? Many employees, partners and investors are finding

themselves furloughed, which creates an ambiguous and ambivalent relationship between you and your employees. Think carefully about how you sustain your relationship with this group as your future success is likely to depend on them. Avoid the temptation to neglect them in the meantime.

In summary, there are many ways that you can and should manage the reputation of your business during the pandemic. Remember that your organisation does not have one, but many reputations that all require careful management. During this period of upheaval and change, ask yourself how are you managing four kinds of reputation: 

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About the Author



William S. Harvey is the Associate Dean (Research & Impact) and Professor of Management at University of Exeter Business School. Will conducts research, teaches and consults in the areas of reputation, leadership, talent management and migration. He has worked with pharmaceutical, healthcare, energy, mining, management consulting, executive search, local and national government, supranational, aviation and food organisations. He has studied, taught and worked with multiple organisations in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and Oceania.