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Individual Case Analysis
Cases in Ethical PR Practice

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Norfolk Southern is a major freight railroad company in the United States, operating in the eastern part of the country. Their network covers a large portion of the eastern United States with connections to major ports and markets in the region. Operating on more than 19,500 miles of track, Norfolk Southern's freight trains play a vital role in transporting goods across the eastern United States and connecting businesses and industries to markets and consumers.

On February 3, 2023, a Norfolk Southern freight train derailed in Ohio, carrying potentially dangerous chemicals. In this accident, 38 cars were derailed, 11 of which contained known carcinogens, Ethylhexyl Acrylate and Vinyl Chloride. This catastrophic incident has the attention of people across the globe, causing concern among residents about the safety of air and water. Norfolk Southern estimates at least 15,000 pounds of soil were contaminated and 1.1 million gallons of water.

East Palestine Officials worked with the Environmental Protection Agency to clean up the wreck, making the difficult decision to dispatch emergency crews to conduct a controlled release of the Vinyl Chloride in five railway cars that were at risk of exploding. On February 6, the immediate area was evacuated, and the chemicals were burned off. The plume of black smoke that resulted from this was called 'apocalyptic' and compared to a disaster film, with pictures circulating social media.

Residents have reported symptoms like headaches, sore throats, and watery eyes. Some residents have reported their pets and livestock falling ill and even dying following the event.

The Ohio Department of Natural resources reported around 3,500 fish died in streams across 7.5 miles south of East Palestine. Though, officials do not attribute these occurrences as direct results of the crash. State and federal agencies have given the municipal water supply and air a clean bill of health, but they have encouraged residents to use private and well-water and drink bottled water as a precaution.

On February 15, news broke that just a day before the incident the same train had broken down and the crew had safety concerns. Norfolk Southern workers are attributing the derailment to the fact the train was an “excessive” 150 cars long, blaming the company for their failure to assign an adequately sized crew and prioritizing profits over people. That evening, East Palestine held a public meeting to ease concern over the incident. A representative from Norfolk Southern was supposed to show up to this meeting, but canceled hours before, citing safety concerns.

Despite their backing out, Norfolk Southern has done a decent job in its response. They have released several statements since the derailment on February 3, their first response on February 4. In that response, they announced their establishment of a Family Assistance Center to help support those directly impacted. They also created an entire webpage with updates on the situation, their plans to make it right, frequently asked questions, as well as a place to submit questions. According to a heartfelt letter from Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw that is published on the website, the company has established a \$1 million community support fund as a down payment to help the community rebuild. Even with the understanding this is a “down payment”, this is a small pledge considering the company’s billions of dollars in profits this past year. Shaw visited East Palestine and has been meeting with government officials and claims Norfolk Southern will stay as long as it takes to get the environment cleaned up. He

acknowledged that the current safety precautions did not prevent this incident from occurring and that the company will be reevaluating its practices. Norfolk Southern has also paid to have a major, local water source rerouted, using a dam and pumps to keep the contaminated area separate.

Despite the very much warranted anger from the community about this situation, it does seem like Norfolk Southern is doing a lot to make amends. The biggest mistake in their response was their representative not showing up to the meeting. I believe Alan Shaw should've shown up to that meeting and issued a formal apology to the citizens of East Palestine. Not showing up due to "safety concerns" is a weak excuse when you have exposed an entire town to toxic chemicals. Other than this though, Norfolk Southern has been communicative, timely, remorseful, and has put their money where their mouth is.

The biggest issue with this crisis is the public's distrust of not only the company but of the local government as well. The officials are assuring people the water is safe, the air is safe, but residents are hesitant. Understandably so, when thousands of fish are floating down the streams and there are known carcinogens that leaked in the wreckage. Trust is something that will only be repaired over time if Norfolk South follows through with its promises. One way to help bridge this gap of understanding is to make an informative PSA that explains the process of cleaning up messes like this in a way people can understand. Calling upon specialists from the Environmental Protection Agency as well as other specialists in the field to give East Palestine the peace of mind they deserve.

Looking to apply this to a future career in Public Relations, I think the best remedy for something like this is internal communications. As always, the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent one altogether. Clearly, executives in this company were not listening to employees. An

incident like this exemplifies the potential of real consequences of this missing link in communication. Whether it was greed or ignorance, there was a message that did not get across to the people it needed to. No matter how good Norfolk Southern's response was, this was a preventable disaster that shouldn't have happened in the first place. It's common to dismiss the importance of a career in communication, but I think this case will be a powerful reminder of what chaos can ensue when communication fails or is ignored. This event also reminds us that our job as a communication professionals is to represent the employees and how important that job really is.

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