

# Role of public relations in crisis management with the coronavirus crisis as an example: A case study on the UAE

Akhmed Khamis Kaleel Kaleel<sup>a</sup>, <sup>a</sup>College of Media and Mass Communication, American University in the Emirates,

Public relations is a social phenomenon that has existed along with mankind in every society. It develops with the development of societies as a result of the social interaction among individuals, organisations, and bodies. Undoubtedly, society and the complexity of human relations in various fields have made people realise that these relationships are worthy of study, research, and investigation. The current world is filled with crises related to the many changes that have occurred in the areas of politics, economics, population, and environment. These changes have affected the social and organisational aspects of human life. The major challenge facing individuals and organisations are the changes in nature, size, and factors of movement, which have created difficulties and problems and caused breakdowns in values, beliefs, and properties. Therefore, facing crises and raising awareness is necessary to avoid further material and moral losses. The research aims to shed light on the procedures followed by the UAE to manage the coronavirus crisis, which other governments can benefit from to manage the crisis in their countries.

**Key words:** *COVID-19, public relations, Crisis Management.*

## Introduction

Public relations is considered one of the most widespread and expanding professions in the world. In a complex society, globalisation and mutual dependency prevail. Various organisations, whether service or commercial, public or private, political or non-profit, or tourism or sports, need employees, practitioners, and specialists to communicate the needs of the organisation to the bodies and masses that deal with it, as well as the delivery of demands,



needs, and attention of those actors and audiences to the organisation. In a rapidly changing world of information and communications technology, and knowledge economy, organisations face two issues: keeping pace with rapid social change and adapting to it or facing extinction and a slow death. In the face of these great challenges, the practitioner of public relations finds himself in need of skills that are not limited to various communication arts. However, he is in urgent need of administrative skills, research skills, and a very large social sense to experience the development and change around him. Public relations today represent a central management dimension in the organisation. Thus, the practitioner of public relations is not only a technical and producer of media materials and press releases but also an integral part of the administrative process within the organisation. He/she is considered an important support for decision-making (Regester and Larkin, 2008). Previously, a public relations practitioner has had to understand, study, and analyse public opinion, produce effective media materials, plan public relations programs, and evaluate the effectiveness of public relations. Today, he/she needs to understand all communication processes and control various management approaches to succeed in his/her profession. A deep understanding of the environment of the organisation, its philosophy, and its privacy are among the most important requirements and conditions for effective and successful public relations in the 21st century (Kendrick, et al. 2019). No profession has been misunderstood today like public relations. Among the problems that it suffers from is the lack of a comprehensive definition of public relations because of its prevalence and presence in all areas and various organisations. Different fields and organisations mean different strategies and goals, and, in this way, the necessity of adapting public relations to the privacy of organisations (Winham, 2020).

Public relations experts and researchers have identified ten basic principles for understanding public relations. Public relations deals with facts and not with lies, intimidation, and empty promises. Public relations is a service primarily concerned with the public interest and not with personal satisfaction. Its programs are directed to the masses. Thus, practitioners are required to take into account the public interest in choosing programs and policies. Mass communication is considered one of the most important means of public relations to reach the masses of the organisation. Therefore, the public relations department must build its relations with these means on the basis of respect, ethics, honesty, trust, professionalism, and craftsmanship (Widmalm, et al.2019). The public relations practitioner is considered the link between the organisation and its audiences. In this way, he must ensure the delivery of news and information in both directions to achieve full understanding and harmony between the two parties. To ensure two-way communication and full understanding, the public relations practitioner must use the scientific results of public opinion polls extensively. To understand and reach what the audience of the organisation says, a public relations practitioner must use the social sciences—psychology, sociology, social psychology, public opinion and communication sciences. Moreover, public relations is a multidisciplinary discipline.



Therefore, a public relations practitioner must take advantage of the scientific results of the humanities and social sciences and employ them and benefit from them in his work. Public relations requires applications from different specialties. One of the tasks of a public relations practitioner is to explain the problems to the public before they develop into crises. Then, a public relations practitioner must comply with the ethics regarding his work. Its success and reputation are linked to its morals, integrity, credibility, and the confidence of others in it (Reuter, Hughes, & Kaufhold, 2018) (Reuter, et al.2018). The location of the public relations agency from the decision-making department leads to its marginalisation and stripping from its strategic tasks within the organisation, which is mainly in research and strategic planning. Public relations without scientific research cannot be effective and have influence within the organisation. However, the proximity of the public relations apparatus to the decision-making department is considered healthy and positive communication between senior management and public relations. It also provides knowledge as to what this department or agency can provide to the organisation as a whole, both internally (organisational communication and internal communication) and externally with regard to marketing the organisation to the public and vice versa (Ferguson, 2018).

The place of public relations in society is related to the place and role of public opinion in society. Public relations is a culture and a practice of democracy before it is a communicative management profession. Public relations begins with public opinion and ends with public opinion. If society does not respect public opinion, then public relations cannot accomplish many of its strategic tasks within the organisation. Public relations is the democratic practice of communicating through its various types and forms inside and outside the organisation. This entails freedom of thought, opinion, and expression, as well as respecting and adopting other opinions if they are rational and correct. Public relations is related to the value of the individual and his/her position in society, as it is mainly based on the individual. Thus, we cannot build healthy, strong, and successful relationships between the organisation and its audiences if we do not respect the individual. The individual here is the capital of the organisation, and respect means exercising a high degree of democracy and responsible freedom when dealing with the organisation. Public relations is only an embodiment of respect for the individual and respect for his/her freedom, opinion, and point of view. The growing importance of public opinion in society, the spread of democracy, the maturity of civil society, and the spread of communication and information technology are all factors that impose the growth of the organisation and urgent need for public relations. Likewise, attention to the public and public opinion is necessary, thus leading to the growth and development of public relations and their spread and the urgent need for them in various types of organisations (e.g., governmental, private, commercial, political, service, and charitable). However, we note the trend of the modern organisation toward management with goals that believe in strategic planning and scientific data for decision-making, as they are



necessary for creativity and innovation in dealing with organisational and administrative problems and issues of different audiences.

### **How the UAE Government Dealt With the Coronavirus Crisis**

State capabilities, the capabilities and efficiency of their institutions, and policies appear in times of crisis. Developing and emerging countries that have clear visions and efficient plans for the future are often more willing to deal with any sudden crises. Their plans take into account all scenarios and formulate the proactive plans necessary to deal with each scenario. These factors are the essence of crisis management (Al-Jenaibi, 2018). Since its emergence in the Chinese city of Wuhan, its subsequent spread to most countries in the world, and its transformation into a global pandemic, the coronavirus has posed a serious crisis. Its negative repercussions have affected most of the world, which vary clearly depending on how countries deal with this crisis and its serious repercussions at all levels (Saddik et al. 2020). Noticeably, developed countries, such as Italy and Spain, and to some extent France and Germany, seem to be unprepared in dealing with a crisis of this level. Moreover, they have not managed the crisis appropriately, as reflected by their transformation into the new epicentres of the epidemic in the world after China. Meanwhile, other countries have declared national emergencies to prevent the spread of the virus (Khan et al. 2020). The UAE provides a great example in managing a crisis of this level.

This country, which pursues an open policy to the world, embraces nationalities from numerous countries. It has the largest and busiest airports in the world. Moreover, it has strategic partnership relations with China, the epicentre of the epidemic. The chances of being affected by the new virus have been increased given all these factors. However, its rational management of the crisis has made the country safe from danger, thus making the UAE one of the least affected countries by the epidemic. This conclusive evidence proves that we have strong institutions that can deal with all challenges and risks. In addition, we have good leadership that leaves nothing to chance but rather plans scientifically for all scenarios and possibilities (Grissom, et al. 2020). The UAE has prepared early to deal with this crisis. It has taken a set of precautionary measures and appropriate preventive measures for it, such as rehabilitating health institutions and hospitals and providing them with all the capabilities that help them deal with any possible cases of injury. The UAE has conducted the necessary medical examinations for all entrants to the state, especially those from countries in which the epidemic has appeared. It follows up on the condition of patients after admission. Moreover, decisive, rapid, and transparent action is made in dealing with detected cases. The UAE also provides appropriate health care to patients and imposes isolation and quarantine on those suspected of contracting the virus. The country has ensured appropriate media and health awareness for all citizens and residents around the clock. It has directed to stop all



events, activities, and human gatherings that can help the spread of the disease while restricting the movement of travel in countries where the epidemic is prevalent.

On the educational level, the decision to provide spring vacation to all schools, universities, and educational institutes has prevented the spread of the virus among students and administrative and educational cadres, thus embodying the true meaning of crisis management. The decision to postpone this study has been accompanied by the move of the Ministry of Education and all educational institutions in the state to approve the distance education system. Meanwhile, some national institutions have started to develop action plans remotely, especially for the elderly and those most at risk of infection. Such a move has demonstrated the flexibility of our national institutions and their ability to adapt to various developments and their possession of proactive plans and procedures that help them to continue to achieve their goals in all circumstances and conditions (Alandijany, et al. 2020). The UAE has not only satisfied its internal success in besieging the epidemic and preventing its spread, it has also provided external support differently from endemic countries, such as China, Italy, and Iran. In addition, the UAE has carried out humanitarian evacuations of nationals of several countries from the Chinese city of Wuhan, brought them to its territories to receive appropriate health care, and created an integrated city called the Emirates Humanitarian City. Certainly, the coronavirus crisis has posed great challenges to the work of governments in various countries of the world. However, in the UAE, the government has been able to overcome all challenges in the areas of education, health, security, and travel because of the strategic plans laid out by the crisis cell in the country (Nair, and Satish, 2020).

### ***Education***

The Ministry of Education has developed strategic plans in the education system and adopted distance education in schools and universities. It has announced that the distance education system will continue until the end of the current academic year 2019-2020. Education will not stop, and it will continue in all circumstances, as the rational leadership asserted. Under the guidance of the Council of Ministers, the distance education system will continue until the end of the current academic year 2019-2020 in all public and private schools and institutions of higher education in the state. They have said, “The decision comes with the aim of ensuring the continuity of education in the state in light of the exceptional circumstances, and at the same time preserving the security and safety of our students and the school community.” She has also stated that the Ministry is constantly working to improve the distance education experience in the state and develop it into the next stage by adding smart solutions and interactive applications for all levels of study. The UAE Ministry of Education has added applications and smart solutions to the educational system to be used during the coming period, such as the Alef platform and Alex platform specialised in



mathematics for the upper levels, the Matvak platform for early childhood stages, and the Nahla and Nahil platform, which specialises in improving reading skills in the Arabic language.

The Ministry has updated and developed evaluation mechanisms and examinations for all educational systems in the country, whether for general or higher education for the current academic year. In addition, it has rescheduled the study plan on the basis of a questionnaire carried out by more than 185 thousand students and parents (Crawford, et al. 2020).

The Ministry has confirmed that the responsibility of parents is focused on providing an appropriate educational environment for our children in homes and encouraging them to adhere to and pursue distance education. The Ministry has also organised continuous counselling sessions for parents on applications used in the distance education system to enable them to support their children and follow them during the next period. Through all these efforts, the public relations departments in the UAE have been instrumental in playing a role that has bridged the link between educational institutions and the target audience. They have directly affected the decision of the Ministry of Education in the Emirates.

### ***Healthcare***

The public relations department in the Ministry of Health in the UAE has played an active role in spreading awareness and accurate news about preparing for infections from the coronavirus, as the Ministry of Health holds a press conference every day through which announcements on injuries, deaths, and recovery are made. The public relations department has also worked by conducting many questionnaires to determining the reaction of the community to the precautionary and preventive measures taken by the bodies affiliated with the Ministry of Health. The Public Relations Department of the Ministry of Health also provides updates on news related to the coronavirus crisis on the website of the Ministry to assist the concerned authorities in making the right decisions on the basis of accurate information. In addition, the department publishes all indicative and awareness data on social media and through the mainstream media in the country to deliver the right and accurate messages to the public (Dent, et al. 2017).

### ***Security***

Four measures for Dubai security guards to deal with suspected coronavirus patients.

The Security Industry Regulatory Agency has issued a preventive guide for security guards in the Emirate of Dubai, with the aim of protecting them from infection from the coronavirus, as part of a number of precautionary measures in line with the efforts of the state to limit the

spread of the coronavirus. The director of the Corporate Communications Department at the Security Industry Regulatory Agency, Eng. Ahmed Saeed Al-Zoud, told Emirates Today that the guide clearly defines the procedures that guards must adhere to during the performance of their duties in securing the facilities assigned to them. The guide also addresses the obligations of security companies to their members inside the designated housing to ensure maximum protection, as they are one of the vital groups in society, with more than 50 thousand guards registered with the institution in the emirate (Tubaishat, et al. 2020). In detail, Al-Zoud stated that the evidence initially clarifies the main symptoms of the coronavirus, the most important of which are fever, difficulty breathing, coughing, headache, and sore throat. He outlined four measures to deal with anyone suspected among the security guards of being infected with the virus. The first step is to keep a one-and-a-half-meter distance. Second, the person must be isolated from the rest of the individuals present. Next, the administration concerned must be informed immediately. Finally, the area surrounding the suspected case must be sterilized.

Al-Zoud added that the guide outlines six basic obligations that security guards must maintain in the workplace. First, they must maintain an adequate distance of not less than one meter from members of society. Second, they must sterilise their hands with an alcoholic antiseptic continuously. Third, they should avoid touching the nose, mouth, and eye. Fourth, in the case of sneezing or coughing, the required preventive measure is to cover the nose. Fifth, security guards must wash their hands frequently with soap and water for a period of at least 20 seconds. Lastly, they must avoid direct contact with anyone who shows signs of the infectious disease.

Moreover, Al-Zoud pointed out that the guide also addresses the obligations of internal security companies at the residence of the guards. First, companies must check the temperatures of all the guards periodically. Second, disinfectants must be provided in each ward, and the security guards must be instructed to use them. Third, nonworking security guards must stay inside the residence and not leave it. Next, to prevent unauthorised entry, all recreational and sporting activities must be suspended. Then, wards, cars, and equipment must be sterilised. Moreover, inspections must be made inside the residence rooms to check the condition of the guards. Lastly, each guard who has dealt with a patient with coronavirus must be isolated and prevented from working for 14 days.

### ***Tourism***

Tourism officials in the UAE are planning to re-receive tourists in Dubai again at the beginning of July 2020, after a suspension period because of the coronavirus outbreak.



According to the newspaper, the return of tourism in Dubai will gradually start from next July. However, whether all tourism or domestic tourism only will be reopened remains unclear, as many countries have allowed internal travel only at the beginning.

Hilal Al-Marri, Director General of the Dubai Department of Tourism and Shopping, affirmed through a statement to Bloomberg that they want to allow tourists to return to the UAE by July, stressing that they have started discussions to restore tourism. However, many countries remain closed.

Al-Marri added that they are seeking to ascertain all matters, saying, “We only need to make sure that we are prepared if things happen earlier than expected.” Regarding the impact of the coronavirus on the tourism sector, Al-Marri stressed that Dubai has been greatly affected. However, he expressed his confidence in returning to normal quickly by focusing on health, hygiene, and the sterilisation of tourism facilities. Such measures may signify an increase in hotel costs (Tubaishat, and Jouhi, 2020).

Tourism is one of the most prominent sources of income in the UAE, as Dubai attracted 16.7 million tourists last year. Dubai has become the main centre of business and tourism in the Middle East because of its beaches, luxury hotels, and high-end shopping centres.

The UAE suspended all incoming flights to the country on March 24, 2020.

Etihad Airways has announced in Abu Dhabi that it is now planning to start operating regular passenger flights from June 16, 2020. The UAE only has over 11,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 89 deaths, as the government has taken preventive measures by imposing a night curfew across the country. Dubai has started easing its restrictions, starting with the reopening of cafes and restaurants by 30%.

### **At Airports**

Dubai Airports Corporation has issued special instructions for incoming and outgoing travellers, explaining that the most important guidance for arrivals is to bring a letter of approval that allows them to return to the Emirates. The Foundation added in a bulletin seen in Emirates Today that departing travellers must wear appropriate personal protection, such as a face mask and gloves, in addition to reaching the airport four hours before the flight date (Awad, et al. 2019).



### ***Arrivals***

In detail, Dubai Airports Corporation has published a set of instructions for incoming travellers. Travellers must bring the required documents, including a letter of approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which allows them to return to the UAE. They must also download the application «COVID19 DXB» of the Health Authority in Dubai, which is available at the App Store and Google Play stores.

### ***Health Status***

The Foundation stated in a bulletin on its website that the travel instructions also include ensuring that the health status form of the Health Authority in Dubai is filled out. The quarantine form that confirms the commitment of the traveller to abide by the mandatory self-quarantine for a period of 14 days must be accomplished in addition to the compulsory medical examination.

### ***Departures***

With regard to departing travellers, the Foundation stated that they must wear appropriate personal protection methods, such as a face mask and gloves, and arrive at the airport four hours before their flight to allow more time for measures and to prepare the required travel documents. Only ticket holders are allowed to enter the airport terminal. They added that travellers should pack their luggage according to the restrictions and requirements issued by the airline. They must make sure to bring all the required documents, including any medical examinations required at the intended destination. Physical distancing procedures must be applied at all stages of travel, pointing out that for the departing travellers, a number of selected restaurants will provide food and drink services inside the building.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has issued a set of standards for coronavirus tests on travellers, which allows governments to choose to administer such tests to travellers from high-risk areas. These tests must be fast and have high accuracy for a large number of travellers. They must also be financially efficient and not constitute any economic or logistical burden for travellers.

The Federation stated that the tests should be carried out by public health officials according to the following criteria:

1-Test results must be delivered quickly, and results should be available in less than an hour, as a standard minimum.



- 2- If the test is administered at the airport, the test capacity should be several hundred per hour.
- 3- Accuracy should be extremely high and necessary, and negative and positive results should be less than 1%.

IATA added that the virus testing must be done 24 hours before travel to achieve optimal results, as this protocol contributes to reducing the risk of virus transmission at the airport and allows dealing with cases carrying the virus early.

### ***Abide by the Rules***

Dubai Airports Corporation requires people to bring a face mask and gloves and adhere to the rules of social distancing at all stages of travel and in various regions. These stages include passing through the terminals for the completion of travel procedures when handing bags and going through customs. The passengers leaving the airport must also be taken into account. The dates of the national sterilisation program and departure from the selected quarantine site (home or hotel) are recorded.

### **Conclusions**

Although the coronavirus crisis has affected many countries and affected the economic, health, and security aspects, activating the role of public relations to deal with the crisis leads to reducing the effects of the crisis significantly on all levels. The measures taken by the UAE to reduce the effects of the epidemic on the country, citizens and residents alike serve as a vivid example. Therefore, modern methods must be followed, and governments must be open to their citizens and deal transparently in crisis management, especially in the coronavirus crisis.



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