IMPACTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES ON INSTITUTIONAL CRISES

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Abstract

Organizational structures distinguish the way in which companies operate in conjunction with their company values and aspirations. Corporations are only as successful as their organizational structures allow them to be. Businesses often struggle with incidents because they do not have reliable organizational structures to depend on. However, plenty of organizations have saved their companies in light of crises because of their well-developed structures. This research piece aims to analyze the functionality of organizational structures in specific crises that have occurred within corporations and institutions. The crises examined occurred within four different industries and involved a variety of threats to the success of their respective organizations. The organizational structures of these companies have commonalities and differences that contributed to both effective and ineffective crisis management. Some of these similarities and distinctions engage with concepts of misconduct, monetary value, and ownership of fault. Making connections between incidents of the past with each other is beneficial to the continuation and creation of businesses throughout industries. Understanding the role of organizational structures in the context of historic corporate catastrophes is important for the development of newer, more effective, structures.

Introduction

Companies and institutions across the world battle a fine line between prosperity and hardship. One single incident or poorly managed scenario can bring a company to its lowest points financially and reputationally. Times of crises often emerge from some form of disordered conduct or structures within an organization. When these challenges arise, the strength of an organization's internal structures is tested. Organizational structures are critical to the success or failure of an organization. Time and time again, companies struggle to navigate incidents and conduct business with appropriate, successful responsive action. Other companies have monitored crises attentively and doing so strengthened their relationships with external partners. Ensuring that structures within a company have integrity for longevity and upholding those structures are essential. Current and future companies must reflect upon incidents that occurred in other corporations and industries in order to improve their own organizational struggles. Doing so with a critical lens is important because it significantly increases successful outcomes if a crisis emerges within their company. Examining the organizational structures of Enron, Pennsylvania State University, Balenciaga, and Johnson and Johnson reveals how integral these structures are to having successful or unsuccessful crisis management. These institutions from different industries all encountered crises that altered their relationship with the public as they widely faced scrutiny. Understanding the role organizational structures played within these specific crises of the past is necessary for improving future corporate structures.

Comparatively analyzing a set of organizations is important to understanding the unique and specific impacts organizational structures have in times of crisis, especially when examining organizations from such diverse industries. Exploring the similarities and differences between institutional crises in relation to the strength of their organizational structures provides insight into what practices and structures future corporate leaders should follow to avoid crises of their own. Each case study featured developed in distinct ways from one another, yet commonalities of organizational strengths and weaknesses can be identified. The four specific organizations chosen, Enron, Pennsylvania State University, Balenciaga, and Johnson and Johnson, were selected because the incidents are objectively very unique from one another but possess similar themes. Some of these themes are workplace misconduct, financial motivations, accountability, and concepts of internal and external fault. Looking into the organizational structures of these four corporations with a deeper lens will provide valuable information into why and how incidents transpire in similar and different ways within multiple industries.

Case Study Synopses

Enron Energy Company. Enron energy company was one of the most successful businesses upon entering into the 21st Century. It was dominating the stock market under the guidance of a new CEO, Jeffery Skillings. Behind the scenes of their exponential growth involved fraudulent accounting practices and a toxic corporate culture. Accountants at the company used a method called 'Mark-to-Market' accounting. This method allowed assets to be recorded as market values, not book values. Book values represent the value of the company after total liabilities are subtracted from the total assets, whereas market values include profits and prospective growth ("Market Value"). Essentially, profits were officially recorded based on Enron's projected numbers and did not reflect their real revenue and assets. These projections did not report the increasing amount of debt Enron was accumulating. To mask the mass debt and failed expenditures, Enron utilized Special Purpose Entities, also known as SPEs. SPEs are temporary collaborations via partnerships or companies that help manage certain assets. Enron transferred their more high-risk assets into external SPEs so that they were not operating directly under the Enron corporation in case of failure. Because these assets were managed under a different company name, these debts were nearly impossible to trace back to Enron. This business style depended on deceptive financial practices with investors in order to improve their status within the energy industry. Simultaneously, a shift in the internal corporate culture created an unstable working environment. At all levels, employees were heavily monitored by management. Workers were not assessed on their skills but rather on their morality and vision for the company. Employees were pressured into sacrificing their morals to keep their jobs. These business practices ultimately drove Enron to bankruptcy in less than a year from their apparent peak of financial success, leaving thousands of employees unemployed and stripped of benefits.

Pennsylvania State University. Jerry Sandusky is a former well-known and decorated assistant football coach at Pennsylvania State University. In 2011, he was arrested and charged with fifty-two counts of sexual abuse of children. Sandusky held his position of assistant coach from 1969 to 1999 until he retired. After his retirement, he dedicated most of his time to the nonprofit organization Sandusky founded years prior in 1977 called The Second Mile. Allegations of abuse range far into and beyond Sandusky's time at the university. Records of abuse can also be traced to occurring within the scope of his nonprofit. On several occasions, Sandusky's inappropriate behaviors and engagements with minors were reported to supervisors in different departments. However, legal action was never taken against the former assistant coach until his eventual arrest. Officials at the university in the athletics department and higher administration at Pennsylvania State suppressed concerns brought forward about Sandusky for years. Several other university employees and officials were criminally charged for their involvement in the concealment of Sandusky's behavior. Pennsylvania State University felt the effects of its negligence when disciplinary actions were taken by the National Collegiate Athletics Association following news of the scandal. The NCAA imposed a $60 million fine on the university, instated a four-year post-season ban on the football team, and stripped the team of all victories earned from 1998 to 2011.

Balenciaga Fashion Company. 2022 was a promising year for the luxury fashion brand Balenciaga. The positive image of the company in fashion circles quickly faded as it became the face of widespread controversy. Within a few days of each other, Balenciaga released two campaigns that imposed themes of child abuse and exploitation. While the campaigns did not have any relation to each other, the content in the campaigns was seen by consumers and media outlets as a promotion of harm toward children. The first campaign released November 16th was called “Balenciaga Gift Shop.” This advertisement featured photographs of children holding damaged teddy bears that wore fishnets and leather harnesses. Additionally, items were placed in the frame that were not appropriately associated with children, such as wine glasses. “Garde-Robe” was the second campaign involved, which was released on November 21st. In this campaign, models were featured in an office setting. When zoomed into the office imagery, papers on the desks contained details of the U.S. Supreme Court decisions on child pornography laws. The specific case included in the pages is U.S. v. Williams of 2008, which involved an individual who was convicted in a federal district court of promoting child pornography. Other items included in this shoot were books associated with art collections that depict toddlers engaging in behavior that has been described as having sinister overtones. Critics took a defensive stance against the brand because these two campaigns were believed to have been created to support the exploitation and violence of children. The controversy sparked internal and external investigations into the set design and approval processes. Balenciaga filed a lawsuit against the production company and set designer for the Garde-Robe campaign that was eventually dropped. The two campaigns were removed from all outlets shortly after their release.

Johnson and Johnson Pharmaceutical Company. In 1982, seven people were poisoned with cyanide-laced Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules in the Chicago area. The deaths occurred within three days of each other. The pharmaceutical company Johnson and Johnson found themselves in the middle of a crisis when it was discovered that their product specifically was used as a vessel for murder. When news of the Tylenol-related deaths broke to the public, mass hysteria spread among consumers who now feared a once-trusted medication. Johnson and Johnson was very active in the investigation into the tampering, as well as the redesign of packaging for medication. The company introduced innovative and protective packaging into the pharmaceutical industry at large that is still required on products manufactured today.

Looking Into Specific Organizational Structures

Enron. Enron succeeded in dominating the energy stock market because of the extreme utilization of asymmetric information. Information asymmetry is the concept and practice in which one party or group involved in a partnership withholds information from the other (Bergh et al. 123). Not disclosing certain information to another during business agreements is common within various industries, however, executives and officials within Enron took this business approach to an exploitive level with the company's investors. Investors were deceived into believing that Enron was generating millions of dollars based on its Mark-to-Market accounting method. Enron executives did not share accurate information regarding their revenue and went to extensive lengths to mask their massive debt and failed expenditures. Because of this imbalance of knowledge on the actualities of the company's financial status, the energy company flourished in the stock market as it seemed to be the best place for investors to entrust their money. CEO Jeffrey Skillings pressed for this specific business model because it ensured corporate growth and personal incentives for their management team (Eichenwald). More growth led to greater bonuses and benefits, which is why many officials at Enron cooperated in this faulty business practice. Enron's mission to progress the company was rooted in personal gain at the expense of external investors. These corrupt methods may have developed at the executive level but soon became the core of the organization's structural integrity. The continuous exchange of asymmetric information was not a sustainable practice and contributed to the legal and financial issues Enron faced leading up to its eventual bankruptcy. The corporate environment at Enron became extremely competitive and toxic to keep all employees compliant with deceptive accounting strategies and asymmetric information within business deals.

When Jeffrey Skillings entered into the role of Enron's chief executive officer, he came in intending to drastically change the way the organization operates internally. This agenda for change quickly created a hostile environment for employees, specifically those who did not agree with their new business practices. A structure was developed that based employee retention on workers' individual beliefs and values in accordance with the values of the company. Every six months, Enron management would conduct performance reviews company-wide that assessed the skills of employees intending to seek out those who possessed skills beneficial to their ruthless and unethical trading motives (Free et al. 15). Employees ranked in the bottom 15% of the company based on the results of the assessments were terminated from their positions. Employees had to choose between job security and their morals. If their morals did not align with the direction Enron was going in then they were left jobless. This cycle of intensely toxic evaluations derailed all ethical standards that were in place before CEO Skilling's promotion. This organizational structure in place was effective for purposes of exploitive gain but was not conducive to the long-term success of the company due to its lack of integrity. The company could not sustain strong relationships with their employees because of this coercion to their fraudulent business models. Enron's management structure was not an ethical way to operate an organization, which contributed to the downfall and bankruptcy of the company. Enron used extremely abusive control methods to maintain an internal culture that complied with their unfavorable business ventures.

Pennsylvania State University. The investigation into Jerry Sandusky exposed fractured structures within Pennsylvania State University. Sandusky's immoral behavior was enabled for years because he never dealt with any repercussions of his actions until legal action was taken far too late. In 1998, the Pennsylvania State Police Department investigated an incident involving the assistant coach with a young boy in a football shower room. This investigation revealed that this incident was one of many between Sandusky and other young boys throughout his time at the institution ("Sandusky Scandal"). Despite Sandusky's confession to inappropriate behavior, no criminal charges were pressed because he promised to never do anything like that again. This, however, did not happen. On multiple occasions, Sandusky's misconduct was reported, yet action was never taken. Witnesses turned to trusted officials to manage these incidents properly given the reporting guidelines of the university. These officials failed to follow through with their promise to uphold the integrity of the system. This reporting structure was deliberately violated in order to protect not just Sandusky but also the entire institution.

The lack of initiative from Penn State to protect its community members from the repetitive behaviors of Sandusky rested upon the institution's desire to protect its own image. Penn State University is an institution that holds great sentimental value to its students, alumni, local community, and more. The institution has deep roots that cultivate a unique culture that many people take pride in associating with. Penn State officials believed that news of Sandusky's misbehavior would diminish trust and pride within the community, so reports made against him were dissolved at all costs. Dismissing the inappropriate acts violated proper structures in place within the university that were established in order to protect individuals from further abuse. Preserving the image of the university came at the cost of several children falling victim to Sandusky's abuse of power. This desire to sustain a positive institutional identity was made especially clear when acting Pennsylvania State President Graham Spanier released an unauthorized statement in support of two university employees who were suspected of concealing Sandusky's actions. Spanier expressed that the charges brought forth against the two were "groundless," and that university officials would have handled all knowledge of inappropriate behavior with integrity ("Statement from"). After the news of what Sandusky had done was released, university officials worked just as hard to protect the public image of the institution as they did when concealing the misconduct in the first place. Proper procedures should have been followed so that Sandusky faced consequences for his actions early on, not decades later. Officials at the university operated independently from their structures for their protection. Maintaining the reputation of Penn State was valued above bringing justice to Sandusky's victims and following codified policies.

Balenciaga. Within less than a week of each other, Balenciaga faced criticism for not one but two controversial campaigns that allegedly slipped through the cracks of their approval teams. Balenciaga went on record to account for these failed ventures as, "the result of reckless negligence," (Paton et al.). The recklessness within these two incidents lies in a lack of internal and external communication during the creation of the campaigns. The first campaign released, Balenciaga Gift Shop, was shot by photographer Gabriele Galimberti famous for his work photographing children and their toy collections from around the world. He was hired onto the project because of his portfolio, yet had minimal involvement in the creative design for this campaign. Balenciaga staff and parents of the children modeling were on set during this shoot and no one ever spoke up about the inappropriate nature of the set designs. Additionally, the photos selected for release were sent through rounds of approval teams but never flagged. Their approval teams were not equipped with a diverse scope of awareness to watch out for this theme of child abuse, which led to this insensitive material reaching the eyes of consumers. Regarding the Garde-Robe campaign, the papers featured in the images were contracted from a prop house that lends out objects and documents for media purposes and were believed to be artificial office documents without any significance. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and the details of the U.S. v. Williams rulings were spread throughout multiple campaign images. Books containing inappropriate images with toddlers were also found in the photos released for Garde-Robe. Balenciaga claimed that these documents and books were not approved by any of the brand's staff and were chosen by the production company and set designer working on the campaign. Balenciaga should have established clear guidelines for the external agents working on the campaign as to what the documents featured should contain. In addition to this, Balenciaga's approval team and executives should have closely inspected every element of the campaign, which did not happen given their lack of awareness of the documents' contents until after the campaign was released. Several teams and officials within Balenciaga failed to thoroughly examine their projects from all angles and interpretations, resulting in the massive scandal that these two ventures generated.

Balenciaga faced much backlash from consumers and media because the company initially did not accept any accountability for the failures of the campaigns, but rather simply apologized for their release days after they had both been published. Statements on social media platforms were issued on November 24th within hours of each other and in them, the brand announced that advertisements for both campaigns would be removed from all outlets ("All the Facts"). One statement on behalf of Balenciaga representatives suggested that the creative agents involved in the Garde-Robe campaign allegedly created the set with malicious intentions against the Balenciaga brand (Paton et al.). These statements were not satisfactory to the public because all blame was deflected from the company. The media strategy team for the fashion company did not calculate the risks that would generate from their generic apologetic statement. Balenciaga's team lacked the inclusion of compassion and humility within their statements, which made the public believe that the company did not understand the impacts and implications of the campaigns. Eventually, officials at the company owned up to their mistakes and took accountability for their role in the prevention of the campaign releases. Balenciaga went on record to say that their Gift Shop campaign was misguided in its design. Additionally, the brand said that the verification of documents within the Garde-Robe campaign was neglected on their part and dropped the pending lawsuit against the involved external parties ("All the Facts"). Had these admissions been made earlier on when the controversy first sparked, there would not have been as much public scrutiny of the brand. The responsive actions approved by teams within Balenciaga were not made in the best interests of the company, which is why the reputation of the company was dampened following these consecutive campaigns. Trends shift very quickly within the fashion industry, so it was not long before the criticism against Balenciaga was buried under several campaigns that followed Balenciaga Gift Shop and Garde-Robe. Balenciaga remains its place as one of the most dominant brands in the fashion world even after these publicized failures.

Johnson and Johnson. The severity of the series of Tylenol-related deaths was acknowledged early on by Johnson and Johnson. Quickly, a team of corporate officials was assembled to meet twice a day to monitor the situation and strategize a plan of action moving forward. During these meetings, the company positioned itself in favor of protecting the customers first and foremost. Their immediate response was to recall all 31 million bottles of Tylenol capsules that were already circulating the market and a statement was issued warning customers to avoid taking any products containing acetaminophen ("Chicago Tylenol Murders"). These collected bottles were sent to a testing facility to investigate if a possible source of contamination could be determined and how many bottles were tampered with. Additionally, Johnson and Johnson removed all advertisements for their products and halted all further production until there was no longer a threat detected. Customers relied on Tylenol for many reasons and it had become a household staple leading up to the tampering. There was much uncertainty surrounding why and how these deaths may have occurred, which damaged the relationship between Tylenol consumers and Johnson and Johnson. Despite the diminishment of this relationship, the pharmaceutical company swiftly regained the trust of consumers because of the strategies they employed following the deaths. Within a year of the murders, Johnson and Johnson regained their status as one of the most powerful corporations within the pharmaceutical industry. Because of their efficient response once notified of the deaths, Johnson and Johnson salvaged its reputation within households around the world. The organization structured itself in a favorable position that actively upheld its commitment to the health of its consumers and its status within the medicinal market.

Through tragedy, innovation blossomed within Johnson and Johnson which soon spread throughout the entire pharmaceutical industry. The pill containers used before this incident did not have any protective features shielding products from external tampering. Because individual pill containers were contaminated and not a wider batch contamination, Johnson and Johnson knew that changes to the packaging of products had to be made to ensure the safety of consumers. Within five weeks of the deaths, tamper-resistant pill containers were launched onto the market. Tamper-proof guidelines for all pill containers were officially established in 1989 by the Food and Drug Administration ("The Tylenol Cyanide"). These changes are still required today and advancements to medication packaging continue to be improved with time. Johnson and Johnson led this mission to increase packaging protections because their product was weaponized for murder. The corporation did not want other users to suffer the same fate as the seven who passed away. Additional motivation for creating new container requirements was improving their damaged image, as discussed before. The corporation knew that finding a solution to the packaging faults was crucial to their success and continuation within the industry. This rapid innovative response made by the company was challenging to do in such a short amount of time and demonstrates the structural strengths of Johnson and Johnson. The repackaging had to be designed, tested for its purpose, approved by several committees, and then mass-produced before making its way to shelves. These processes usually take a long time before results make their way into the market, yet Johnson and Johnson did so in a little over one month. The layers of coordination throughout the company that worked to establish these changes were highly efficient, which solidifies how structurally sound they were in this time of crisis. The company delivered these innovations promptly because of their effective structural dynamics in place at the time of the murders. Adopting changes to the containers restored reliability to Johnson and Johnson among everyday users.

Differences and Similarities Among Incidents

Misconduct within the workplace is one of the largest factors that contributed to the incidents at Enron and Pennsylvania State University. Both organizations exercised excessive abuse of power that fostered enabling environments for unlawful and immoral behavior. In the case of Enron, this misconduct occurred at the financial level with their fraudulent accounting practices, as well as within the infectious corporate culture that pressured employees to support their deceptive use of asymmetric information. Officials at Penn State never reprimanded Jerry Sandusky for his several instances of reported endangerment of minors, which allowed this behavior to continue for years within the operations of the university and Sandusky's independent projects as well. Enron and Pennsylvania State University suppressed information and employee voices in the process of concealing the misconduct that occurred within both corporate entities. Officials at the two greatly challenged their organizational structures to the point where abusive behaviors were never addressed at higher levels.

The immorality of Enron's business models was driven by financial hardship yet financial setbacks do not always lead to compromised values in corporate settings. Enron upheld dishonest accounting strategies because officials believed that doing so would resolve the organization's financial problems given its growth within the stock market. The energy company compromised its integrity because of the financial greed of Enron's management teams. When reviewing the Johnson and Johnson incident, all production, sales, and advertisements were stopped even though this meant that the company would take a massive loss in the pharmaceutical market. Johnson and Johnson was not deterred from doing right by their consumers because of the projected losses. Losing profit on the millions of medication and unaired ads was not something that executives at Johnson and Johnson debated upon because they prioritized ethics and their moral duty to consumers. This ethical perspective that the pharmaceutical company had during their incident was never addressed by Enron leaders. Enron narrowed its scope of practice to exploitive methods seeking uncharted economic success and was blinded to any morality at the time, unlike Johnson and Johnson.

Accountability during challenging corporate incidents is important when addressing the concerns of a larger audience. Pennsylvania State University deflected as much blame as possible onto only Jerry Sandusky even though several other university officials knew about

Sandusky's behavior and did everything in their power to prevent legal action from taking place. The statements from former President Spanier immediately following Sandusky's arrest did not accept any accountability for the faults of the university and went as far as defending the honor of employees who were later convicted in relation to child endangerment. Within a similar scope, Balenciaga's initial apologies focused more on investigating how these oversights were made rather than taking accountability for publishing the two campaigns. The campaigns had intensely inappropriate undertones that were not addressed in the best way by the brand early on in the controversy. Eventually, Balenciaga accepted full responsibility for the neglect of sensitivity awareness and, by doing so, properly addressed the concerns that came from the public. Johnson and Johnson, on the other hand, could not take accountability specifically for the murders because the lacing of Tylenol was done by an unknown party. However, Johnson and Johnson's very timely action plan signified the company's responsibility to consumers. The wide-scale lab testing and development of safer medication packaging was Johnson and Johnson's way of accepting fault for a tragedy that their product unfortunately facilitated. These differences in corporate accountability for incidents influence the relationship between organizations and the public in very distinct ways. Pennsylvania State University's communal pride suffered tremendously because trust between the institution and community members was broken. Balenciaga recovered from the infamous campaigns, but that was not an immediate process because of the time it took for the brand to accept its shortcomings. Johnson and Johnson was more successful than the other two organizations because their immediate accountability helped recover their relationship with consumers quickly. The three organizations were not supported by the public in the same way because of how they chose to navigate taking accountability for their respective incidents.

The outcome of organizations after facing crises is greatly attributed to whether or not the incident involved internal or external fault. The incidents at Enron and Pennsylvania State were primarily internal and developed because of their poor organizational structures and enablement of multiple wrongdoings. These failures could only be possible because of internal actions, which is why multiple officials from both Enron and Pennsylvania State were pressed with criminal charges. Conversely, the incidents of Balenciaga and Johnson and Johnson had certain amounts of external involvement at play. Balenciaga had some internal issues regarding the campaigns, but also suffered because of external relationships with their vendors, whereas Johnson and Johnson had no involvement in the tampering of their medications at all. Initially, both companies were not well received by the public because of the severity of the incidents. However, the recovery actions of the two prevented significant corporate fallout given that fault was not solely from the companies. This distinction of internal or external agents within crises and incidents is crucial to note because responsive action varies when the fault can be directed at one's own organization or an outsider. Additionally, if strong organizational structures were established and followed correctly then many corporate incidents could be avoided. These issues within Enron and Pennsylvania State University were exacerbated because their structures were not conducive to proper workplace standards. Johnson and Johnson could only act after the murders had already occurred but took the crisis very seriously in hopes of preventing future harm. To a lesser extent, the same can be said for Balenciaga. Internal and external involvement with incidents influences the intensity of the aftermath and tests the strength of organizational structures.

Reflecting on the Four Incidents and Looking to the Future

The organizational actions taken by these four companies discussed are important when gathering an understanding of how to appropriately conduct business. The incidents of Enron, Pennsylvania State University, Balenciaga, and Johnson and Johnson highlight themes that are critical to know in business management. Enron's use of unethical and fraudulent business models was not sustainable and drove a once-successful business to financial ruin. The concealment of Jerry Sandusky's behavior at Pennsylvania State University was done in hopes of keeping the image of the university clean, but it came at the expense of bringing justice to his victims and garnered communal disappointment and distrust. Balenciaga's disastrous campaigns emphasize the need for proper communication and approval processes within organizations. Finally, Johnson and Johnson's prompt response to addressing the Chicago Tylenol Murders signifies how important corporate initiative and action are when incidents emerge.

Future organizations throughout every industry can learn from past incidents and crises. The strengths and weaknesses exhibited within these four case studies stand as guidelines for the improvement of organizational structures moving forward. Organizational structures define the values and foundations of institutions. Because of this, it is essential that business officials have a basic understanding of how these structures interacted with corporate incidents of the past to develop more secure and stable companies. Corporate incidents of the past should be seen as building blocks for creating stronger and more sustainable organizations.

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