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# Crisis of the Week: NAACP Under Scrutiny in Dolezal Scandal

By Ben DiPietro



In this March 2, 2015 photo, Rachel Dolezal, former president of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP, poses for a photo in her Spokane, Wash., home. Dolezal resigned on June 15 amid a furor over her racial identity.

Colin Mulvany/Associated Press

*The crisis this week involves the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and how it has handled allegations that the former president of its Spokane, Wash., chapter was a white woman who was telling people she was black. The civil rights organization found itself in the spotlight after the parents of Rachel Dolezal [came forward](#) to say their daughter was a white woman. As the controversy drew international attention, Ms. Dolezal [resigned](#) from her [position](#), but maintained that she identified as a black woman.*

*The NAACP issued two statements: one [before](#) Ms. Dolezal resigned, and one [after](#) she stepped down.*

*Focusing solely on those two statements, we asked the experts to evaluate how well the organization has handled the crisis, where it did well, where it fell short, and what it should do in its next steps as this story continues to unfold.*

**Andrea Bonime-Blanc, CEO of GEC Risk Advisory and author of the “The Reputation Risk Handbook.”:** “This is a complex story...where there is nowhere to run or hide when information—whether correct, incorrect or in between—hits the media. The NAACP leadership was faced with a complex public and personal issue whose true nature was best captured by the statements of Eric Blauer, pastor of Jacob’s Well Church in Spokane, when he stated to the Wall Street Journal that this was not a racial issue but ‘one of integrity—whether or not she lied.’

“The NAACP’s first press release on June 12 was generally balanced in its tone, as they were absorbing the information and did not want to besmirch Ms. Dolezal’s reputation. In retrospect, it might have been advisable for them to state that they took the allegations seriously, were investigating facts of the situation and would issue another statement as soon as that information was obtained. It is critical in today’s super-charged, super-fast social media and information marketplace that an organization be—and appear to be—proactive in meeting possible criticism up front. Their second press release was also generally balanced but again focused away from the issue at hand. While this is understandable, avoiding the issue can also backfire, in the form of criticism of the way a crisis is handled.

“While I don’t believe either of these press releases created any long-term concerns for the NAACP, my recommendation for any organization facing similar situations is to focus squarely on the controversy at hand, providing assurances to the public that the issue is being taken seriously, being investigated and that the public will be kept informed as necessary. This way the organization can maintain both the transparency and the upper hand that is so needed in today’s truly challenging and unruly age of information hyper-transparency and super-connectivity.”

**Anthony Johndrow, co-founder and CEO, Reputation Economy Advisors:** “The NAACP’s initial response to the breaking news about Rachel Dolezal and her subsequent resignation was exactly what they needed to say and more. Rather than get sucked into the racial identity conversation, they directly and clearly responded as an organization that knows what it is and what it stands for.

“I cannot think of an organization that has done a better job of using the attention that comes from a crisis to emphasize a core message ‘to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons.’ For an organization that has largely been out of the public eye for some time, it is surprising how articulate and focused the NAACP is on both its civil and human rights mission and its intersection with the far more weighty issues of the day.

“Going forward, the second half of their stated mission, beyond the civil and human rights part, is ‘to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination’ may yet force them to take a stance on Ms. Dolezal’s situation as it unfolds. Meanwhile, for Cornel William Brooks to be able to clearly and succinctly say ‘our focus must be on issues not individuals’ is far better than the typical corporate dodge and a forceful shift to what we all should be focusing on instead of this story.”

**Richard Levick, chairman and CEO, Levick:** “[Many people] of all races and ethnicities took exception to Rachel Dolezal’s [apparent] dishonesty, poor judgment and apparent assumption that physical appearance is as defining of the African-American identity as the daily struggle for racial equality. Despite the fact that those views may be justified, the NAACP wisely remained above the fray. The organization makes history—but also recognized when it was smart not to. This was Rachel Dolezal’s fight.

“When in the eye of the storm, it is exceedingly difficult for any organization to step back and ask ‘are we the crisis?’ The NAACP looked far enough into its past and future to realize that it was not. That conclusion formed the basis for statements that deserve high praise for their composure, their eloquence and their ability to distance the NAACP from the crisis while not abandoning an ally who embodies its commitment to equality.

“In the statement prior to her resignation, the NAACP stood behind Ms. Dolezal’s commendable advocacy record, discouraged social media attacks on her character, and made clear that ‘One’s racial identity is not a qualifying criteria or disqualifying standard for NAACP leadership.’ In so doing, the organization elevated its good works over the reverse ‘passing’ phenomenon...and made clear that the fight against American’s history of apartheid is one in which all Americans must be engaged.

“In the statement following her resignation, the organization leveraged the national spotlight to call attention to police brutality, voter disenfranchisement, and income inequality—as well as to promote its ‘Journey for Justice’ and encourage Americans of every color to take part in the historic 860-mile march. The NAACP may not have been the story, but the spotlight was on it nonetheless. As such, it leveraged the opportunity to speak on what really matters.”

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