

INFO6007, Week 8

Self-driving Uber Issue: Project Leadership & Communication Viewpoints

Uber's CEO Sent This Tweet After a Self-Driving Vehicle Killed a Pedestrian.

Class Discussion: What Went Wrong and Right?

Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi clearly missed an opportunity to show his humanity amid tragedy

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Pilot models of the Uber self-driving car on display at the Uber Advanced Technologies Center on September 13, 2016, in Pittsburgh. Uber launched a groundbreaking driverless car service, stealing ahead of Detroit auto giants and Silicon Valley rivals with technology that could revolutionize transportation. CREDIT: Getty Images

Adapted from <https://www.inc.com/marcel-schwantes/with-this-tweet-in-reaction-to-a-woman-fatally-hit-by-a-self-driving-vehicle-ubers-ceo-failed-a-huge-leadership-lesson.html>

Ride-hailing company [Uber](#) has had its fair share of highly-publicized troubles over the years, including sexual harassment and discrimination scandals that resulted in co-founder [Travis Kalanick](#) being ousted by shareholders last summer.

Kalanick was replaced by current CEO [Dara Khosrowshahi](#), who's worked hard to reinvent Uber's culture and transform its bad boy image.

Now trouble has struck again, putting Khosrowshahi's leadership under media scrutiny.

Pedestrian killed by Uber car in "autonomous mode."

A report this morning from several news sources confirms that a pedestrian walking her bike at a crosswalk in Tempe, Arizona, was killed when struck by an Uber vehicle in autonomous mode, which Uber has confirmed.

The Uber test vehicle, a Volvo XC90, [reportedly hit](#) 49-year-old Elaine Herzberg. According to Tempe police, the XC90 had a driver behind the wheel but was in autonomous mode, [ABC 15](#) reports.

It's also reported that Uber has suspended its self-driving operations in San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Phoenix, and Toronto. This is the first reported fatality between an autonomous vehicle and a pedestrian.

Khosrowshahi's first response in question.

Uber's first company-issued tweet after the accident was appropriate: "Our hearts go out to the victim's family. We're fully cooperating with @TempePolice and local authorities as they investigate this incident."

Khosrowshahi's first tweet after a horrific event that is gaining fast momentum, however, is missing one critical leadership component.



So what's wrong with this tweet, you ask? It seems just fine—he's acknowledging what happened and sends "thoughts" (not sure it qualifies as condolences) to the victim's family while working with local law enforcement as all the facts come in. Textbook PR, it appears. And that's the problem: too scripted, not enough authenticity.

Here's where he went wrong.

He didn't say "I'm sorry."

While no person should judge another by one single tweet, this is a good opportunity to size up Khosrowshahi's leadership instincts under crisis against the best leaders in similar circumstances.

And the best leaders, when faced with something as terrible as the death of another person, irrespective of how much blame (or no blame) may come their or their company's way as a consequence, will always do the right thing first: saying sorry.

Sure, as of this writing, we don't yet know what happened. We don't know if the pedestrian, God rest her soul, made the fatal mistake of stepping in front of the car at the wrong time.

We don't know if the driver inside the XC90 fell ill, was inebriated, or busy reading the front page of the *Arizona Republic*.

And it's too soon to implicate Uber's self-driving technology for the accident. It's just too soon.

But it's never, ever, too soon to say "I'm sorry," even when you're not at fault. That's where Khosrowshahi missed the boat on showcasing the true leadership strengths of humility and vulnerability.

When it comes to building a sense of community during the darkest hours, you have to say you're sorry, and mean it from the heart.

When it comes restoring faith in others--your employees, your customers, the public--amid tragedy and impending media attacks, you have to say you are sorry.

At its heart, an apology in all its sincerity declares ownership. As the high-profile CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company, it's admitting "I am responsible" and "I will do whatever it takes to fix this."

With all eyes on them to see how they'll respond when under fire, responsible CEOs are quick to accept blame. They understand that timing is critical and apologies need to happen as soon as possible.

They are keenly aware that a delay in apologizing often makes the situation worse, as later apologies lose their meaning.

They also completely understand that this is not the time to make a bad situation worse by deflecting blame, pointing fingers elsewhere, or priding themselves on being right. The focus should be 100 percent on the victim and the victim's family. As they grieve, great leaders huddle around them and offer every ounce of compassion they can to alleviate the suffering of those families. It's all about them.

Final thoughts.

As of this writing, Khosrowshahi has not issued any new tweets to say "I'm sorry" to the family of the victim, or to take ownership for what happened. Granted, by being human ourselves, we should extend him some grace and give him the benefit of the doubt; perhaps he did issue a private apology to a very private family matter in the worst of times. Perhaps he *is* aware of his tweet's lack of humanity and took care of the matter privately. Whatever the case, the verdict is still out. Let's watch Khosrowshahi closely and see what transpires, as this unfortunate story unfolds.