



THE RESPECT PODCAST with host Mike Domitrz

And Guest Melissa Agnes

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Mike: Welcome to the Respect Podcast. I'm your host Mike Domish from mikespeaks.com where we help organizations of all sizes, educational institutions and the U.S. Military create a culture of respect, and respect is exactly what we discuss on this show so let's get started. And for this episode we have a very special guest, that is Melissa Agnes. Melissa, just so everyone's aware, a little background on Melissa, is the author of Crisis Ready: Building An Invincible Brand In An Uncertain World. She's also a leading authority on crisis preparedness, reputation management and brand protection. She's a coveted speaker, commentator, and advisor to some of today's leading organizations faced with the greatest risk, so thank you very much Melissa for joining us.

Melissa: Thanks to you Mike for having me.

Mike: Oh, absolutely. Let's get right into this, what is crisis preparedness mean?

Melissa: Crisis preparedness, so I'm going to use the term crisis ready because it's a little bit different to me than the typical crisis preparedness, which is why I kinda coined that term and the book is all about that and the work that I do is all about that, so to be crisis ready it means that your entire organization, every single member of the team understands what risk looks like, how to detect and assess it in real time and then how to respond and act in a way that doesn't just manage the issue and put it to bed but actually manages it in a way that fosters increased trust and credibility in the organization rather than depreciating from it.

Mike: And does it also apply over into personal life?

Melissa: It absolutely does because crisis management is about relationships. Business is about relationships, life is about relationships so crisis management is about relationships, it's about people. People more than relationships I should say and so yeah, it would definitely cross over to personal.

Mike: And what role does culture play into that? So we obviously ... We're all about respect here on the Respect Podcast, how does culture play a role here in being crisis ready?

Melissa: To be crisis ready, you have to have a crisis ready culture. So culture comes from the top down and goes right back up from bottom up. Having a culture of crisis readiness means that again, the entire team is prepared, understands what risks looks like, how to identify it, how to access it, how to respond but in order to get to that level, that requires training. It requires having a culture that puts people first above process and bottom line always and what that looks like, that your team is encouraged, empowered and rewarded to do that. So culture plays a huge role. Actually, you can't be crisis ready without a crisis ready culture.



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Mike: And so I think when people hear crisis ready they think of fear, right? That something horrible is gonna happen, we have to be ready. This is a stereotype that people have in their heads.

Melissa: Well with the word crisis.

Mike: Correct.

Melissa: Yeah.

Mike: As soon as they hear the word crisis, they think well, I don't want to be scaring my people. I'm sure you run into that stereotype that's out there, so how do you address when people go, "It just sounds so negative that oh, we have to be ready for the worst all the time."

Melissa: The thing is, is that so every single organization, it doesn't matter if you're a brand of 1 or 10000. Every single organization has a series of high risk scenarios that are the most likely high impact types of events that you are prone or vulnerable to. That could be catastrophic crisis, it could also be every day issue management. Customer complaints, whatever it may be. You lose your best sales people or operations cease for whatever reason for a given time period, may not escalate to those crazy catastrophic crisis but issue management being crisis ready, which is all the things that I've already said goes to issue management every single day as well. And the reality is that, when you know it, when you are crisis ready, you chose your lens and you don't see them as scary, negative incidents, instead you see them as opportunities to live and prove your values and connect closer with those who matter most to your business.

Mike: So what are skills that are essential for people to understand, to become crisis ready?

Melissa: I'm gonna go instead of with skills, I'll go with, because skills are development, right? So you don't necessarily have to have those skills right now but there are practices that you can put into place that will help you and your team develop those skills. So the very first is to identify or define what a crisis verses an issue is for your organization, because a crisis for one organization does not automatically translate into a crisis for another. And understanding the difference between crisis and issues, especially in this world today where issues can go viral in minutes and garner so much unwanted attention, whether it's locally or globally, or nationally, doesn't matter but the reality is that virality is not the criteria for defining crisis. So in order to respond effectively, you have to have those two issue verses crisis defined for your organization.

Mike: It's very much ... A friend of mine Sean Stevens, he's also on the show as a guest, he always talks about the fact that in the White House, it's called the situation room. It isn't called the crisis room, it isn't called that we have a problem room, it's called the situation room and I think that allows you to go in there and decide is this a crisis or is this an issue?



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Melissa: Yep.

Mike: And is that the biggest mistake that people make? And I think we do it in our personal lives too, we make everything a crisis when it's just an issue.

Melissa: I wouldn't say it's the biggest mistake people make, I think that it's a mistake that leads to mismanagement and therefore if we define successful crisis management or issue management as fostering increased trust and credibility in a brand, well you're not going to achieve it. There's two biggest mistakes that I see organizations make regularly, the first is they don't respond in a timely fashion with emotional intelligence, or I should say ... Let me rephrase that. They don't effectively respond in the right timeframe, and the second is that employees are an afterthought.

Mike: Right, so there's a lack of respect of their team.

Melissa: I would never say that it's a lack of respect, I think that it's ... When you aren't prepared, whether it's a viral issue or a crisis, you think about customers and clients and investors and the board and you think about all of the external stakeholders and the afterthought, and it's the thing that I see the most actually, is that employees are an afterthought. Oh man, I had a client once before they became my client, they had an incident where there was a potential active shooter on their grounds, and they had 185000 people on their grounds in that moment, and they were Tweeting about it rather than communicating internally to their 30 plus thousand members who were on the grounds and who could relay the important information to keep people safe, and it was not a lack of respect, it was not a lack of not wanting to provide adequate crisis communication in that moment to the people on their grounds, it was simply a lack of being ready for it.

Melissa: I think right now the mindset is social media, social media, social media. And some people come to me and they'll say, "[inaudible 00:07:48] crisis communication or crisis management is all about social media right?" And I say, "It's only about social media if that makes sense." In this particular scenario that I'm describing, social media is the secondary mean of communication, first is keeping people safe, second is relaying to the rest of the world that people are safe and what's going on. It wasn't a lack of respect for their team, it was a lack of preparedness and understanding of what needs to be done. They did the best that they could do in that moment having not been prepared.

Mike: Well what's interesting is the employee though can feel disrespected in that, like how could they not tell me right? That's a common response ...

Melissa: And I'm not a part of the time, yeah absolutely.

Mike: Right. How did they not communicate directly to me? I mean how could they not think of me and respect for many people, respect is about being seen and valued. So if I appear to be secondary even it's intentional or not intentional, I'm taking care of my



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clients, I'm taking care of this, I'm taking care of that, but if I'm the one who feels secondary, it can feel like there's a lack of respect in my value in this situation.

Melissa: And not just that but they will, kind of adding to what you just said, your employees will receive incoming inquiries and questions from the stakeholders that they own the relationships with, and in order to effectively manage a crisis, you need to have consistency in messaging across the board, and I see often that with the best intentions, mistakes are made as a result of not informing the team, not training the team, et cetera, et cetera.

Mike: Yeah, it makes total sense. I mean if you think of personal lives, we can do the same thing, right? A parent in a moment of what they think is crisis can do everything they think is right but they're not actually taking the kid into mind in the situation, they're taking their own fears into mind, right? So they're reacting to their fears not what's gonna actually work for my child long term to learn here. It's very much ...

Melissa: Human nature sometimes.

Mike: Its human nature and companies can do the same thing. I'm gonna react to this fear verses what's going to be important to everybody that I'm impacting.

Melissa: From a corporate standpoint the only way to do that effectively is to put thought, strategic thought and preparation in it in advance.

Mike: And so how many people make the mistake of doing ...

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Melissa: Operation in it in advance.

Mike: How many people make the mistake of doing the opposite of what I brought up? I brought up the turning of everything into a crisis. Everything is a fire, and people are known for doing that in their personal lives. How many companies fail to understand there's a fire? They think it's just an issue, and it's a crisis.

Melissa: Or they think it's going to go to bed by itself.

Mike: Right.

Melissa: It's going to go away. This is a common mistake, and risk actually in today's world because a lot of longstanding organizations that may have experienced crises or bigger, larger scale issues in the past. Perhaps they've taken a different approach at managing those issues and crises, maybe they didn't talk or communicated. Maybe they didn't whatever it was that they did doesn't necessarily translate into what is required today because times have changed. Expectations have evolved, demands have increased.



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- Melissa: The threshold of expectations, and demands from stakeholders is much higher, and begins at minute one today rather than what we've seen in the past, like a decade ago for example. That is a very big risk, and actually part of my crisis ready model the second phase is education, and that is internal education. That's often times what I see is a director, for example, will bring me in and they'll have been requested to do so by a member of leadership. The C-Suite, but one thing that I see often is that one, two, three members of the C-Suite they get it, they understand that they're at risk, that they're not ready.
- Melissa: They bring me in as an advisor, but part of that initial phase or one of the initial phases is to gain buy-in from the other members of C-Suite because they still have those more archaic mindsets, or they just haven't come to terms or have been educated on the fact that times have changed, and what worked in the past is not going to work today.
- Mike: How does emotion play into being crisis ready?
- Melissa: Emotion is a big part of it. There's two sides there. Internally and externally. A motion internally, you need to communicate with emotional intelligence internally, and externally. Then externally, emotion and relatability is one of the biggest impacts to escalating an issue. Making an issue go viral or escalating it into crisis level. Understanding those two dynamics, and having a team I said earlier that being crisis ready means that your entire team can identify and assess.
- Melissa: They need to be able to determine in a moment to evaluate, and to assess the situation, and say, "Is this emotionally relatable? And as a result, does this threaten to have a long-term material impact on the organization on its operations? On its bottom line? On its reputation? On its people? Etc."
- Mike: To take in that breath, a lot of the emotion not to run us over, right? Just take a breath and think logically, rationally, strategically.
- Melissa: Which is extremely hard to do. One of my crisis ready rules is you'll never trump emotion with logic. You can't do that unless you have put thought into it. You've had training because the reality is that even when you're a large organization, this is your livelihood, and odds are you believe in the brand. When something catastrophic happens, and people's lives are put in dangers or the reputation is put at stake, that's emotional. We can't just say, "We're not going to be emotional. We're going to be logical." Even the most logical being on the planet, we'll get emotional.
- Melissa: It's all about you need to understand that beforehand, and the more readiness you have instilled, and implemented, the more likely you are to be rational versus emotional.
- Mike: How does respect play a role in all of this?



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- Melissa: Respect is relationships, right? Respect earns trust. Respect earns credibility. Respects earns all of the makings of what's required to run a successful business both internally and externally. Respect goes to emotional intelligence. Respect goes to not forgetting your team, and your employees, and empowering them to make smart decisions when it matters most in the blink of an eye. Respect goes to all of it. Respecting and validating the emotions of your stakeholders in times of issue, and crisis, so that they feel validated, and therefore know that you care, and you can get through to them on a logical basis. You can overcome the emotion, and speak to them logically, and help them, right?
- Melissa: Correct the mistakes, right wrongs, provide them with assistance, whatever the case calls for. Relationships is all about respect, and crisis management is about people in relationships.
- Mike: Can you give us an example? You gave a good one earlier where they made a poor choice of the Twitter. They thought they were doing the right thing. Where would be an example of where they did keep the people at the frontline with respect? Everybody all through the organization. In a moment of crisis, they really have respect on how it's going to impact everyone, and they handled it brilliantly. Can you think of an example?
- Melissa: I can think of an example that I think will resonate more. Let me think for a second. I'm trying to think of a catastrophic one that will hit all of these marks. The Ebola crisis back in 2014. Emory University Hospital, they were the first hospital to get the opportunity to treat two Ebola patients. They learned that summer that they'd be flying two missionary doctors who had been stationed in West Africa, and had unfortunately contracted disease to their hospital for care. What Emory had done for months leading up to this was train with the center, the CDC. Their entire team knew the protocols, they were crisis ready for this, they were ready for it.
- Melissa: They even have this special ward specifically designed, and prepared in the event of this needing to happen. Emory, when they found out that they'd be flying in these two missionary doctors they're also very active within the community both online, and offline. What they did was they created an editorial that made this announcement that they were extremely honored to share, and to be that first hospital to care for these two American doctors. They created this editorial, they published it, and then they shared it on social. They were blindsided with the response. The emotional response of the general public.
- Melissa: Within minutes, they were receiving thousands upon thousands of Tweets, and Retweets from prominent figures, and celebrities Tweeting their discontent with the situation, and garnering thousands upon thousands of Retweets of those Tweets. Their Facebook page is being flooded with messages that said things like, "You're bringing the plague into our country. Shame on you." When I spoke to them, they said that it felt like every single minute there were 100 new emails in their inbox with the same sentiment.



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Melissa: I'm painting the scene here. Emery was so crisis ready or is so crisis ready that firstly they knew this was an issue that was going viral, not a crisis. But they also took the time to understand why, and they didn't take a lot of time to do it. Within under an hour, they had sought to understand what was driving this outrage, and this fear. It was two things. They realized that people didn't realize that they were so prepared. They did a poor job in communicating the level of preparedness that they had achieved, and people in general were so scared of this Ebola virus, and didn't understand how it is contracted logically, realistically.

Melissa: Going back to your point of respect, the entire team at Emery they knew to respect the emotions of the general public, and their entire team sought to do that. What they did was, and they also knew that they needed to communicate with emotional intelligence. They couldn't come out and say, "Guys, we're ready for this. Don't worry." Nobody is going to listen to that when their panic is going, "Oh my goodness. You're going to bring this plague into our country, and our family is going to die." That's your rational fear that was stemming, and making all of this happen.

Melissa: What they did was they hit emotion with emotion, and then brought in logic afterwards. Over the span of a couple of days, they put out editorials, they put out videos, they put out infographics, and beautiful visual charts that confronted the fear, and then led to logic, and validated the emotions of the general public. As a result, it almost immediately switched over. The narrative almost immediately switched over. From a virality that went from, "You are bringing the plague into our country," turned virality to, "I'm so honored. I'm proud to have you in my community. Thank you for your service."

Melissa: That came from a respect of everything. From understanding the risk of the scenario, and being prepared to be in that position to help Americans in need if that were to occur. The respect of training, and empowering their team members to be ready straight through to the respect of understanding, and validating the emotion that resulted in this viral issue, and being able to being equipped, and emotionally intelligent enough to flip that almost instantaneously.

Mike: It's brilliant. You mentioned that, once again, they understood this was not a crisis. It was an issue that had gone viral. What is the key differences for people to be able to recognize for themselves the difference in an issue versus a crisis?

Melissa: Absolutely. Crisis

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Mike: ... you versus a crisis.

Melissa: Absolutely. So crisis is, I'm going to give a high-level definition, and then those listening and watching should really take this and adapt it to their organization. Because, like I



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said, a crisis for one organization does not necessarily transcribe into a crisis for another.

Melissa: So a crisis is a negative event or situation that stops business as usual to some extent. It stops business as usual because it needs to be immediately escalated straight to the top of leadership because it requires their assessment, their directives, their guidance, their decision-making. Why? Because the incident itself threatens long-term material impact on one or all of the following five things: people, the environment, business operations, the organization's reputation and/or the organization's bottom line.

Melissa: So an event that stops business as usual because it needs escalation to leadership for their directive and decision-making and guidance because it threatens long-term negative impact on people, environment, business operations, reputation and/or bottom line. Whereas an issue is a negative event or situation that doesn't stop business as usual. I see issue management as business as usual on a hyperdrive because it doesn't need to go straight up to the top because it doesn't threaten that long-term material impact on any one of those five things.

Mike: Yeah, I could see a great example is let's say that you're a contractor with the US military or you're a speaker, and something goes viral negative about you, that is reported, doing some kind of thing. That's an issue, unless it could become a crisis down the road, but it's an issue. But if the military announced, "We will no longer be using contractors," that's a crisis if that's your company's way that you serve. Because now your business is going to not exist, so there's a huge difference there. They both impact my business, right? But one is, will my business even exist in a year because of this? That's a traumatic difference than it's going to harm my reputation. That's an issue.

Melissa: Absolutely. Yep. It's going to harm my reputation, and I can overcome it by doing what's right. By knowing how to respond, I cannot let it escalate further and, in fact, de-escalate it and transform it into an opportunity.

Mike: That's great. I love that clarity, so thank you.

Melissa: My pleasure.

Mike: What are books, or one book that has had an impact on your career in getting to where you are today?

Melissa: I will say, because you framed that question the way that you did, I will say "The NOW Revolution" by Jay Baer. So a few years ago, well almost a decade now, ago, I knew that there was something that people weren't talking about. It was at the time where organizations were kind of just realizing the power of social media and the benefits that it provided to their marketing and PR. The way that my brain works is that I see risk everywhere. I always have. I see risk. I see mitigation strategies for that risk, and then I



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see opportunity through the mitigation. That's kind of the pattern that my brain takes naturally.

Melissa: So when we were doing social media marketing and digital branding for organizations, my mind was always going to the risk, and I didn't understand why nobody was looking at it or assessing it or talking about it, and it was so important. Right at the time when I was about to switch my services and say, "You know what? People need this, and this is where I'm going to go," I happened to be reading Jay's book. There was a chapter on the risk of Facebook and the risk of real-time social media, and that kind of gave me a ... I didn't require the validation, but it did help in kind of just validating the fact that if somebody like Jay was talking about this, then I was onto something smart and good, and it kind of encouraged me to follow where I was going to go.

Mike: Very cool. How has respect played in your life, your journey, your path?

Melissa: Everything is about respect. I mean, that's such a powerful question. In terms of my own respect to me from others, it makes or breaks whether you're in my life, professionally and personally. In regards to me towards others, my favorite thing is helping, serving and empowering, and that is about respecting. Dave Carroll, he's a speaker and he's the United Breaks Guitars creator, and he said in his book, which is another great book about culture and really respect, he says that no one person is statistically insignificant, and I believe that to my core. Organizations that respect, internally and externally, and are crisis-ready because they see that, too. People above process and bottom line always, and every one person matters. They make up the summation. So yeah.

Mike: You mentioned there that if somebody is not respecting me, whether in my personal life or my professional life, then they're not going to be in my life. I'm going to make that choice. So how do you measure? Do you have a measurement? Some people do. Some people you're like, "Hey, I ask myself this question. And if the answer isn't this, I know what I need to do."

Melissa: I don't have a measurement. I've done it pretty well throughout my life, and I've made very, very difficult decisions within my life to cease communication with family members, for example, because they detracted rather than brought value, and it wasn't worth it to me. It's not worth it for the quality of my life and my existence and the things that I want to do in terms of serving others. So no, I don't know that there's any things, but I'm very, very selective with both my friends, my family and my clients. So I guess it's more on intuition and action. Actions speak wonders.

Mike: Not letting everyone in in the first place, right?

Melissa: Yes.

Mike: If you're that selective, then you're being careful before they get in, where a lot of us let everybody in and then go, "Oh no, I don't want them in anymore," right?



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Melissa: Yeah.

Mike: So if we had not let them in. Now, is there a risk that I'm a read wrong here, and I'm not letting them in, and they could be wonderful? Or is it like, "Well, I've got to have a cut-off. That's my cut-off?"

Melissa: Well, it's not as black-and-white. So not letting somebody in, friendship is developed over time, right? You don't just make a best friend tomorrow. So it happens progressively, and it's a give-and-take. I mean, sometimes friendships develop really quickly because there's this wonderful synergy and mutual respect and just two real humans being real with one another and adding value to each others' lives in beautiful ways. And sometimes along that path, you realize nope, you know what? We don't align. That's it. I wish you well, and I'm going to continue on my journey.

Mike: Yeah, and that's okay.

Melissa: Absolutely, that's okay.

Mike: It's not bad.

Melissa: In fact, it's the opposite of bad. It brings value to your life and to theirs. I have no time or use for drama or negativity or belittlement or the opposite of respect. So the quicker I can extinguish that from my life in every single way, the more I'm able to serve others and be the best version of myself that I can be.

Mike: I love it. Thank you so much, Melissa, for sharing your brilliance with us and being here with us today.

Melissa: My pleasure, Mike. This was a fun conversation.

Mike: Well, thanks. Hey, if someone wants to find you, where's the best place for them to find you?

Melissa: Melissaagnes.com is the hub. That's the website. From there, you can find my new book, which is "Crisis Ready: Building an Invincible Brand in an Uncertain World," which really takes you through from wherever you currently sit on the spectrum of crisis readiness straight through to building brand invincibility. Because if your team is in a position to immediately detect, assess and respond to a negative incident in a way that fosters increased trust and respect and credibility in the brand, then you can weather any storm, and your business becomes invincible. So you can find that through melissaagnes.com as well as all of the social channels that I'm on and so many videos and free resources and podcasts and just a wealth of really, I think, fun content.

Mike: Everybody can find that at melissaagnes.com, and we're going to have that in the show notes. We're also going to have the book link to "The NOW Revolution" on there, too. So



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we'll provide all that along with your bio so people can learn more about you. Thank you once again.

Melissa: Thanks to you, Mike. This was fun.

Mike: Thank you for joining us for this episode of "The RESPECT Podcast," which was sponsored by The Date Safe Project at datesafeproject.org. And remember, you can always find me at mikespeaks.com.

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