The GitLab Database Incident

TEACHING NOTES

Case Synopsis

GitLab offers an open source platform for software developers, with a solution for users, and a different one for companies such as IBM, NASA, Alibaba, and Sony. On January 31st, 2017, one of GitLab's engineers accidentally deleted a primary database of GitLab.com which is accessed by approximately 1800 contributors and millions of users worldwide. They realized their backup failed and they needed to take down the website to initiate attempts to recover data. Immediately, they informed their audience on Twitter about the incident and invited their community to help solving the problem. They created a Google Doc and live streamed on YouTube their engineers' efforts to fix it. They were able to restore most of the data but still permanently lost a massive amount, affecting 5.000 projects, 5.000 comments and 700 new user accounts. Their CEO apologized and posted a detailed explanation of the incident and the new procedures to prevent process flaws. GitLab handled the crisis with full transparency and collaboration of their community which is the essence of their brand promise and core values. They received great support from their community of users and their reputation was affected positively after their actions to manage the crisis.

Teaching Plan

A prerequisite for a successful case discussion is a well-planned structure to guide the instructor and students. The learning objectives should be clarified prior to the presentation of the case and should be a result of the case discussion and management decisions revealed after it. In order to guide the instructor on GitLab's database incident case, a visual graph shows the interlink between key concepts which should be described and referred to during the presentation, discussion and, final reflection phases. This graph can be kept visible during the discussion in order to inspire students and to incentive argumentations based on theory. It assists the instructor to meet the learning objectives designed for the specific case. It also gives context to the discussion and positions the case according to the course modules previously taught in the course of Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation.
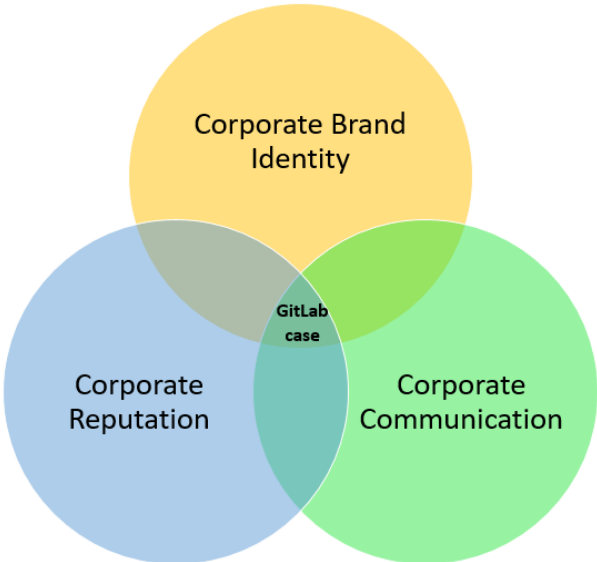
Figure A   Key Concepts of GitLab case

Learning Objectives

The case of GitLab is an evergreen example of how to approach a crisis right on time; without any prior crisis preparation or plan on how to deal with a situation that brings the corporate reputation along with the entire existence of the company at stake. This crisis is not remembered as the failure of the company's procedures, by letting a junior engineer have full access to manipulate the entire database while the database is set to backup only once per day, on the contrary, sets a great example on how to react to a rushing incident without a crisis management plan at hand and making the failure seem like a slight problem that can be fixed without any major harm.

As shown after the crisis GitLab confronted, the management never forgot the core values of the brand throughout this process, making heartful decisions aligned with the brand's core values. Their six core values are Collaboration, Results, Efficiency, Diversity, Iteration, and Transparency (CREDIT). The company continued to have a focus on their values - or else - the CREDIT the staff give to each other literally and metaphorically.

Handling a crisis transparently and with professionalism, while trying to solve the problem as quick as possible, could be considered as the fundamentals that every company would implement on a similar incident. Accepting responsibility while protecting the responsible employee, not only reveal that the company functions based on its core values but also is eager to stand by them on their toughest times. It is worth noting that the management team decided not to fire the junior engineer but kept his anonymity while also considered that the whole incident was a learning experience for both the engineer and the company.

GitLab's reputation stands on the same levels as before the crisis if not even improved, as the customers now trust them more and appreciate their efforts to solve the problem so fast and transparent. They kept their credibility, relevance, responsibility, and trustworthiness, and increased their recognizability and willingness-to-support given the different elements of reputation. GitLab's brand core promise and core values remained the same during and after the crisis although the essence of them is changing according to the conditions. Meaning that they continually improve and update their values after suggestions that can be done not only by team members and the core team but also but any other professional.

The analysis of the GitLab's case provides the reader with useful insights and application of key concepts at the field of Corporate Brand Management and Reputation and in-depth understanding of the subjects of Corporate Communication, Reputation, Identity and Crisis Management. A literature review of these subjects will follow in connection with the GitLab's case learning objectives.

Theories

Corporate Communication and Crisis management

Corporate communications and crisis management are interlinked with the corporate reputation and if not handled properly, damage to the corporate reputational capital can usually seem inevitable (Roper & Fill, 2012). Therefore, extensive planning before a possible disaster ought to be done which tends to provide more positive outcomes to the company than when not having a plan. On the contrary, a poor plan can solely deliver poor outcomes (Roper & Fill, 2012).

GitLab was brought to the position to apply a communication strategy based on a defensive situation; the company's reputation was at stake because of an employee's wrong actions. In defensive strategies, supplying your stakeholders with the correct information in a timely manner is crucial (Roper & Fill, 2012). Due to the company's open-source structure, GitLab managed to activate most of their contributors, their supporter stakeholders that have the power, knowledge and are eager to support the company to overcome the incident.

When a crisis strikes, executives should focus on the uncertainty that is created as part of the aftereffects of this crisis (Roper & Fill, 2012). The B2B customers of GitLab should be reassured that another data loss incident would not happen and feel safe to trust the company with their software operations. The community of the developers and contributors of the GitLab's platform must know that their work will not go again in vain. Overall, GitLab stakeholders must feel that the company is trustworthy again.

As Augustine (1995) states when a company is in a crisis the best managerial decision can be summed up in the following words "Tell the truth and tell it fast". Through his extended business-related crisis experience, Augustine insists that this is the only way to keep the company focused on its long-term existence. The well-known and tragic Tylenol incident of Johnson & Johnson is presented to strengthen Augustine's viewpoint as it is closely related to the GitLab's case.

In 1982 seven deaths occurred in Chicago caused by the consumption of Tylenol acetaminophen capsules. Johnson & Johnson, without losing valuable time to examine the cause of these deaths decided to act immediately and withdraw all the stock of Tylenol from the selling points. The findings of later investigation showed that the poisoning occurred due to faulty packaging, provided by a third-party supplier. The decision to act fast by withdrawing all the stock from store shelves and home cabinets, informing consumers through print and television ads, and redesigning the packaging helped the company regain 95% of its pre-crisis market share (Augustine, 1995). Augustine (1995) argues that Johnsons & Johnsons decisions in this crisis demonstrated the company's concerns for the customers and its ethical standards; their corporate CREDO which where the principles they were relying on made the company be regarded even more highly after the crisis.

In the case of GitLab, even without a crisis management plan, they decided to act fast; say the truth and say it fast as in the Tylenol incident. The company relying on their core values, their CREDIT, went fully transparent through their digital platforms during the incident and were determined to solve the problem along with their community. GitLab's managerial decisions were proven the most righteous since their reputation was not negatively affected by the crisis. They also restructured their procedures that let this crisis burst at the first point, and are more than willing to share

their gained experience with everyone interested through their public blog posts, their social media, and even by presenting their case in developers' conferences. GitLab managed to keep its perceived authenticity high, resulting in positive reputation. The four contexts of perceived authenticity (Greyser, 2009) that GitLab succeeded in maintaining throughout their crisis management are: talking authentic in their communication with their community, being authentic in their behavior, staying authentic and aligned to their core values and defending their authenticity through the crisis.

Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation

Brand identity is an essential tool of brand management that allows managers to specify the facets that are creating value and are unique for the brand (Kapferer, 2015). Corporate identity are the elements that impose what truly makes an organization exist, being coherent and unique, with its own place and history (Kapferer, 2015). In modern Brand Management literature there used to be a gap of tools related to Corporate Brand Management. This gap is recently filled by the introduction of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix by Urde (2013) and the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM) by Urde & Greyser (2016); these matrices assist managers when trying to explore the linkages between the corporate brand identity elements along with the reputation elements. The CBIRM is illustrated in **Figure B**.
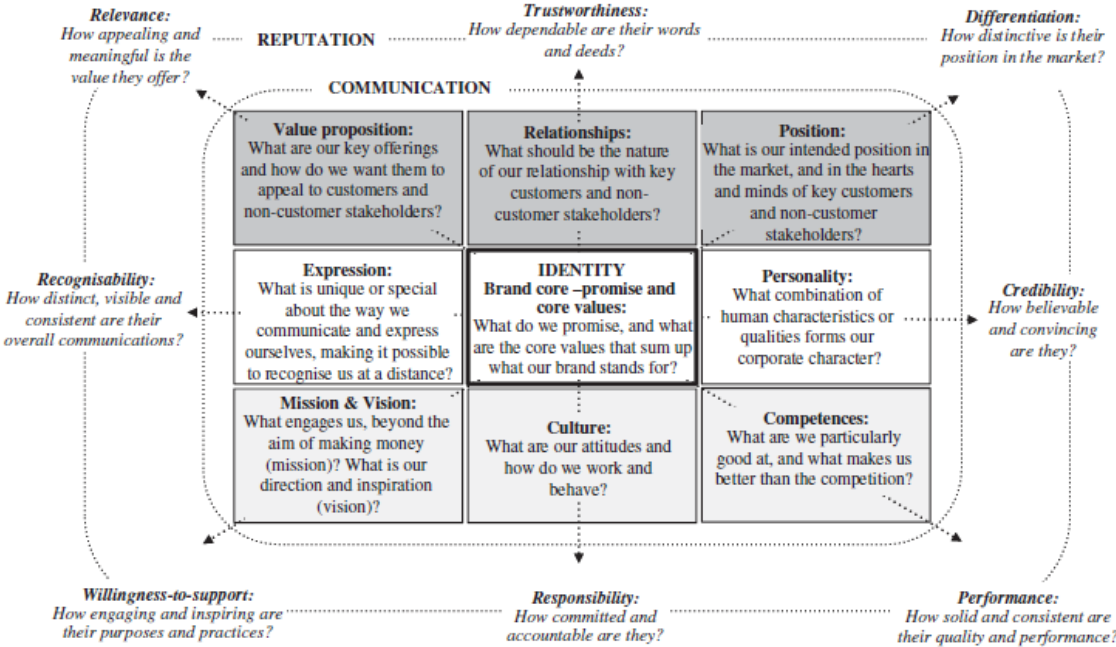
Figure B   The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM)
Source Urde & Greyser (2016)

The core of the CBIRM illustrates the Corporate Brand Identity and the peripheral external elements the Corporate Reputation and how they are formed

based on the communication that the company establishes with its internal and external environment (Urde & Greyser, 2016). For the analysis of the GitLab's case, we focus on the brand core along with the following three corporate brand identity elements; the Mission and Vision, the Culture, and the Relationship elements that support the brand core and are closely interlinked with the reputation elements of Willingness-to-support, Responsibility, and Trustworthiness.
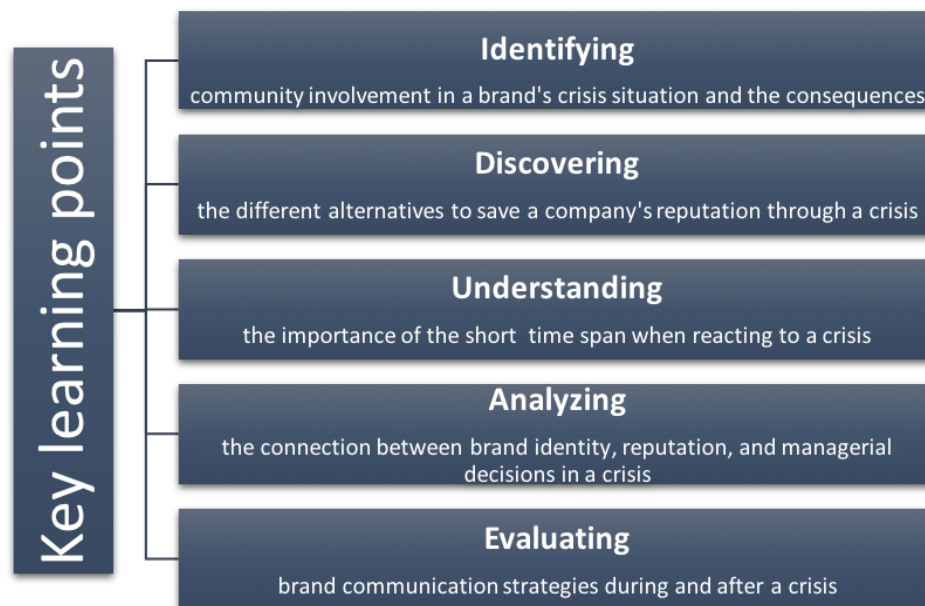
GitLab promises to respect and support their community and GitLab's Community Edition, their free community platform, without compromising or undermining its functions and features in order to promote their paid GitLab Enterprise Edition. Its mission is to change all creative work from read-only to read-write so that everyone can contribute by ultimately fulfilling their vision to allow everyone to collaborate on all digital content so people can cooperate effectively and achieve better results, faster. Based on their six-core values Collaboration, Results, Efficiency, Diversity, Iteration, and Transparency (CREDIT), GitLab cultivates a co-working culture that brings all the contributors into a unified community of co-creators that respects and values each other's work and efforts. Moreover, those values, with a focus on collaboration and transparency, form the relationship of GitLab with its key customers and non customer stakeholders.

These elements, enhanced by the strong GitLab promise and core values, made the community strongly relate to the brand. Community's actions showed their willingness to support the company during the crisis, by committing and providing their valuable spare time to retrieve the lost database. Working as a unified team, with one common goal, co-creators and developers showed the real importance of GitLab's core values on which their community is built. Therefore, proving their commitment and accountability of both the community's as well as the company's side enhancing the element of responsibility of GitLab's reputation. GitLab channeling through its community collaborative support and the company's effective decisions managed to reflect and enhance their trustworthiness to all their stakeholders.

Overview of Key Learnings

This case study focus is exploring and understanding reputation crisis management, corporate communication and reputation through a real life business case: The GitLab database incident. In this case study, we are identifying and evaluating the company's crisis communications with their users, stakeholders, and the public. Below you will find **Figure C** which shows an overview of the key learning points of this case, and **Table A** with the main crisis management key learnings of the GitLab case:

Figure C: Key learning points

Table A: Crisis management key learnings of the GitLab case

Case Scenarios

1) Manage the crisis silently and internally

Hide the outage and communicate that their website is down for maintenance while they try to fix the problem as fast as possible. Take the junior engineer who committed the mistake out of the case and hand it over to senior developers to solve the problem. When the problem is finally fixed get the GitLab's website running again without referring to the incident again.

2) Communicating product failure

Take the website down saying they had a database problem and are trying to restore it. Communicate the real problem in more details when the issue is solved making a statement without revealing that the cause of the incident was a human mistake, therefore, not exposing their employee and the vulnerability of the system.

3) Go full transparent

Share the situation in real time with their community letting them give suggestions on how to fix this problem, since their users are mostly software developers. Keep the junior engineer involved in the case trying to restore the data with other team members.

Table B: Scenarios

Scenarios	Consequences and risks
Manage the crisis silently and internally	1. Perceived like a regular website maintenance - like it never happened. 2. Unapologetic downtime - Decreased community satisfaction and trustworthiness. 3. Avoid public shaming.
Communicating product failure	1. It hides the vulnerability of the system where one person can have access to delete an entire database. 2. The product, as well as the company, can be perceived by their customers and the community as unreliable. 3. If the concealment is revealed - instead of a product failure, it was a human mistake - it would generate bad publicity and incredibility within partners.
Go full transparent	1. Earn customers' trust by being open and transparent about the problem. 2. Could be seen as an unprofessional approach. 3. Public humiliation of the person responsible for the incident: junior engineer.

Discussing Questions

Main Question

- *How should GitLab communicate this incident to their community of users and would this affect their reputation among their stakeholders?*

Assisting Questions

- *Should GitLab fire the junior engineer who deleted the database?*

- *What would be the consequences of each alternative of action for their brand reputation?*
- *How would the incident be perceived by their stakeholders?*
- *Would we share the outage with the community; real time, later time or never?*
- *Should they have different approaches to communicate the incident with each stakeholder group?*

Teaching Suggestions

In addition to the questions which assist the instructor in guiding the discussion, this section provides teaching suggestions to enhance the involvement of students and better structure the case presentation in class. It is recommended to follow a prepared time plan and board plan to organize the case presentation and students' arguments during the discussion phase. Additionally, attached visuals are provided including speaker notes in each slide to assist the instructor in keeping the audience interested and engaged in the discussion. It also helps the instructor to follow the sequence of topics to be discussed without losing the focus on learning objectives.

Initial presentation of the case

Visual material such as the attached PowerPoint enhances the engagement of the audience and helps guide the sequence of thoughts and topics to be presented by the instructor to the class. It is important to keep eye contact with the students and to maintain an open environment for questions. It is also recommended that students use name tags to maintain a more effective and personal communication with the instructor.

When presenting the GitLab case the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016) provides a theoretical framework to explain the relation of their mission and vision statement with their core values which is the essence of their brand promise. It is essential for students to remember the internal elements of the corporate brand identity to guide their alternatives and arguments when playing the role of GitLab's executive team during the case discussion.

Case discussion

When initiating the discussion phase, the instructor should remind the audience of the role they are supposed to play as the management team. It is important to clarify the manners to participate in the discussion, by raising the hand and waiting for the instructor's approval to speak, for example. The instructor should make eye contact with the student who is talking and if a more in-depth explanation is needed, make questions to help understand the rationale creation of the student discourse. This will assist in reasoning the decisions and arguments in class.

It is also suggested to keep the main question always visible during the discussion for a more focused argumentation. The assisting questions can be used to keep the discussion going or to bring the audience back to the topic aligned with the key learning objectives. Additionally, a whiteboard should be used to allocate student opinions in four different categories: Challenges, Alternatives, Risks, and Actions during the discussion. It is a visual tool which assists the instructor to categorize different opinions and students to formulate arguments and take into consideration the various facets and complexity of a crisis management.
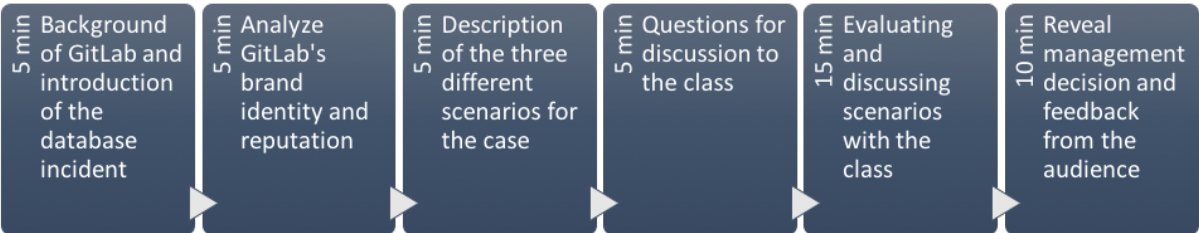
Finally, a voting system should be used to summarize and determine the managerial actions chosen by the majority of the students in the class. A simple count of raised hands could be a system or the use of colored ballot cards. It is important to test the chosen system before with the students with a simple question to ensure it works properly with this audience. Furthermore, a student could be asked to voluntarily summarize the case main challenges and the management decision agreed after the discussion.

Time Plan

A time plan was designed in order to ensure that all the key points of the case are presented and discussed in the given time. The case presentation lasts approximately 45 minutes and is divided into 6 different parts. First 5 minutes are dedicated to the background of GitLab and an introduction to the incident, next 5 minutes are about analyzing GitLab's brand identity and reputation through the use of theory, next 5 minutes after that to describe the three different scenarios, next 5 minutes to make 1-3 questions for discussion to the class, next 15 minutes to evaluate and discuss the scenarios with the class, and the last 10 minutes to reveal the management decision and get some feedback from the audience.

Furthermore, if the given time is less than 45 minutes then the first two parts will be summarized into one in order to last less time. The theory part can be incorporated into the ending of the first part and before the management decision questions. In the case that there is additional time, for example, more than 1-1,5 hour then there can be an expansion of the last part. Thus, the discussion of the alternative scenarios can be more thorough and detailed.

Figure D   Time plan

5 min	5 min	5 min	5 min	15 min	10 min
Background of GitLab and introduction of the database incident	Analyze GitLab's brand identity and reputation	Description of the three different scenarios for the case	Questions for discussion to the class	Evaluating and discussing scenarios with the class	Reveal management decision and feedback from the audience

Board plan

A board plan is suggested to be used in the presentation of the case in order to organize the audience's feedback and evaluations and put a structure to the main points of discussion which in this case are divided into four categories. The categories are challenges, alternatives (divided into the three given scenarios), risks (divided after each alternative scenario), and actions.

Table C   Board plan

Challenges	Alternatives	Risks	Actions
- Perception of the incident by different stakeholders - Reputation damage among their community - Possible negative reputation spillover with B2B customers - Possibility of permanent data loss - Lawsuits due to data loss affecting commercial projects - Interrupt the service for millions of users by taking the GitLab.com down - How to regain community trust - Affects their credibility	**1- Manage the crisis silently and internally** - Regular website maintenance - like it never happened. - Avoid public shaming. **2- Communicate product failure,** - Not inform that human mistake as the cause - Hide vulnerability of the system **3- Go full transparent** - Earn customers' trust by being open and transparent about the problem. - Action aligned with their core values	1- Unapologetic down time - Decreased community satisfaction and trustworthiness. 2- The product, as well as the company, can be perceived by their customers and the community as unreliable. - Negative effect on their credibility if the human mistake is revealed 3- Could be seen as unprofessional - Public humiliation of the person responsible for the incident: junior engineer.	**Transparency** - Communicate the problem in details to their community - Apologize in public **Collaboration** - Ask for help from their community which is formed by software developers - Keep the junior engineer responsible involved in the process **Efficiency** - full effort on restoring the database as soon as possible **Iteration** -Learn from mistakes and implement new procedures to avoid these type of mistake - Control access to primary databases

Epilogue

Discovering the different alternatives to save a company's reputation through a crisis, understanding the importance of the short time span when reacting to a crisis, and analyzing the connection between brand identity, reputation and managerial decisions in a crisis are key learnings in the case of GitLab and can be evaluated in various ways. These ways depend on each managerial team and their brand promise

and identity. In this case, the managerial decisions were to face the problem, apologize immediately by offering a detailed explanation of the incident and go full transparent. Moreover, they had an open communication with the public on social media by making constant updates of the problem resolving progress and by being interactive in comments. The company kept their brand core values on focus throughout the crisis and gained the community's trust and understanding. The learning outcomes of this case can be used as examples in teaching in branding and reputation courses but also in communication management and crisis management.

Reflection

As part of the course *BUSN35 Corporate Brand Management and Reputation* taught by professor Mats Urde, students were assigned with the task to write and present a management decision case. Groups of three students decided on relevant topics and presented three options during a supervision appointment with the professor Urde and assistant teacher, Axel Welinder. From the options discussed GitLab's case provided more opportunities to apply the theoretical concepts previously presented in class and reach the desired learning objectives.

We started our learning journey by gathering information we found on GitLab's website and specialized entrepreneurship media channels. After we had a comprehensive view of the case and the management decisions we contacted GitLab in order to hear their perspective of the crisis and to explore in-depth how they handled this incident. Connor Shea, Community Advocate and Fronted Engineer at GitLab immediately replied to our email and provided a detailed video where he presented the case in a conference, DevOpsDays Rockies. He also provided us with the live stream YouTube video they recorded when trying to solve the problem in their database. This material was very useful to understand step by step each action they took when handling the crisis. We were not sure if the outage had affected their business-to-business customers and Connor confirmed that their major customers where not impacted. He also explained that by the time of the incident GitLab was still free for users so more complex projects, which is the case of their key customers, were not supported by their website yet.

We then started a reflection on how they could have reacted to this incident in order to elaborate three possible scenarios to discuss during the case presentation. Other cases presented during the course lecture served as an inspiration for us in terms of alternatives and challenges that needed to be addressed by GitLab's management team. Furthermore, the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix by Urde and Greyser (2016) provided the theoretical context for an in-depth analysis of GitLab's corporate brand elements and how we could analyse their actions aligned with their brand promise and core values.

The questions for discussion were a critical element as it should guide the students without being bias in order to accomplish the learning objectives. Moreover, the order of questions is very important and we have done some simulations in an attempt to define the order that would lead to a resonant discussion. Thus, we have exercised our critical thinking and analytical skills during this case assignment.

The GitLab case is very interesting and innovative as it is a company based on a digital community with worldwide reach. Software as a Service (Saas) companies are becoming common and many new businesses are emerging with different business models and technologies. GitLab community is a co-creator of their service offer and their brand essence. Other than technology, companies are innovating in the way they involve their customers in the development of their business. For GitLab their community is in the core of their brand and is their most valuable asset. It is inspiring to see how GitLab used digital channels and technologies to communicate with their community and kept them together during the entire crisis. Students and entrepreneurs can learn an important lesson from GitLab case: no matter the nature of your business you must act according to your core values and promises, which in their case was based in their transparent and collaborative community.

The most challenging part of the process of this case writing and presentation was to play the role of a teacher in order to instruct and guide a case discussion for students. We are used to be part of the audience and the exercise to be in the position of the presenter is extremely empowering. Besides, it is an essential process in the formation of managers and future leaders. It gives the opportunity for students to lead a discussion, to practice their critical and independent knowledge construction, other than training public speaking and persuasion skills which are very important in any career.

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