

# Rogue Employee

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On April 17 at 5:17 am, a Tecumseh charter bus loaded with 76 children and adults en route to Disney World in Orlando, FL overturned and burned on Hwy 95 near Jacksonville, FL. Thirty-two passengers died of whom 13 were grade-school children. The driver, Harold Singh, escaped and was found sitting 200 yards from the bus by the side of the road. Police arrested Singh and asked what happened. He gave no answer.

Singh had not contacted his dispatcher, and the CEO of Tecumseh in Atlanta was only alerted to the accident by news reports on CNN. By time the CEO ordered a supervisor from Jacksonville to the scene, the incident was an hour old. The supervisor had difficulty reaching the accident because Highway 95 had been closed and the traffic backup was miles deep. When he arrived, there were two dozen ambulances and emergency vehicles standing by near the ditch where the bus lay with its tires in the air and smoke pouring from shattered windows. Body bags were strewn on the ground. A child was being wheeled on a stretcher to a waiting ambulance. Two paramedics were bandaging the head of a gray-haired man whose shirt was bloody. Others were hunched over victims on the grass.

The media were out in force on the other side of yellow tape barring entrance to the scene. Two news helicopters hovered overhead. Reporters were interviewing anyone and everyone who knew anything about the accident. Live reports on Jacksonville TV stations were conflicting but told an appalling story. Singh was speeding. He had been talking on a cell phone and lost control of the bus when a car cut him off. The bus swerved, struck a light standard then rolled. Some passengers not wearing seat belts were seriously injured or perhaps killed outright. Others started to crawl out when the bus filled with smoke. Singh wormed through a shattered front window and ran. Passersby stopped to help victims but were driven back by flames from the engine compartment. It took 20 minutes for police and fire to reach the scene. By then, the entire bus was engulfed in fire and the injured were scattered on the ground. A witness described the scene as a "war zone." Even more jarringly, several eyewitnesses said Singh had refused to help even when they had argued with him to join them. There were brief video clips of Singh as he was escorted into the main Jacksonville police station.

All this was reported to Tecumseh's CEO who had already launched the company's emergency plan. The passenger manifest was sequestered, a call made to the Brunswick, GA First Baptist Church where the trip had started and notifications to parents and relatives had begun. Tecumseh sent a bus to Brunswick to ferry relatives to Jacksonville where the dead and injured were

being taken and the company reserved motel rooms in Jacksonville to put up families for the next week. The CEO, the operations chief and public relations manager dashed for a helicopter waiting to fly them to Jacksonville. Upon arrival, the CEO would go to the hospital and meet with the media there, the operations chief to talk with the driver and the PR manager to the scene of the accident. Jacksonville employees were designated to escort arriving families to the hospital and motel rooms.

By the afternoon, the Florida state highway patrol had retrieved and read the bus' event data recorder (EDR) and checked Singh's driving record. The EDR recorded the bus traveling at 79 miles per hour in a 65-mile-per-hour zone when the brakes were engaged full force. The bus' steering angle was 40 degrees as it veered from the highway and G forces showed its collision with the light pole. Singh's driving record showed he had been cited for speeding two years before and suspended for six months. This information leaked to the media almost immediately and was on 6 pm newscasts. Meanwhile, *The Florida Times-Union* in Jacksonville put a diagram of the accident on its web site (Jacksonville.com), 30 photos of the bus, of survivors and of the dead, and paragraphs of eyewitness testimony from victims as well as passersby. CNN had covered the accident throughout the day. The three major networks' nightly news programs led with the tragedy and mounting death toll. (Three more passengers had died in the hospital from smoke inhalation.)

Tecumseh's CEO had Singh's employment record pulled and called in Singh's supervisor. He asked if the supervisor knew that Singh was using a cell phone while driving, a breach of rules that resulted in immediate dismissal. The supervisor said he did not, but he reported that Singh was a marginal employee who had been put on suspension three times in six years. Singh didn't take direction well, was often late to work and had been cited for lack of courtesy to passengers. Still, there had been no move to fire him. The CEO asked why. The supervisor shrugged. "He isn't the worst driver we have had. I just have to ride herd on him more than the others."

The media cascade over the next week nearly buried Tecumseh, and lawsuits almost finished the engulfment. The company lost 40 percent of its bookings at once. Lawsuits were in the millions. Singh was charged with a traffic violation and leaving the scene of an accident. Tecumseh suspended advertising, but could not escape media questions about the company and Singh, his past and his baffling refusal to help rescue passengers. Although Singh remained silent, his public defender said Singh was deeply sorry about what happened.

Two weeks after the accident when the funerals were over and media attention had lessened, Tecumseh's CEO called in his marketing and PR managers to discuss how to re-launch Tecumseh. He knew it wasn't going to be easy.

"Do we have any more Singhs?" the marketing manager asked.

“HR is reviewing the record of every driver and interviewing supervisors.”

“How did Singh stay on the job so long?” asked the PR manager.

“I wish I knew,” said the CEO. “We’re governing all 1500 buses to a maximum of 65. We’ll finish installation of GPS tracking in three months. We’re wiring a panic button on the dash for emergencies and auto-dialing of the dispatcher if the bus comes to an abrupt stop. Stop-motion video of the driver and traffic in front of the bus will be in by next year. We can’t let this happen again.”

“We had a great safety record for 10 years,” said the marketing manager, “Maybe we should play that up with the new safety elements.”

“I wouldn’t,” said the PR manager. “Anything we say can’t override 35 dead nor can we explain why we kept Singh. We can brief the media quietly on the new safety devices, but we had better be ready to explain why we didn’t have them before now.”

“Do you realize how much this is costing?” asked the CEO.

“The media aren’t sensitive to cost. They just want to know people are safe.”

“So what do you suggest to get us back on track?” asked the CEO.

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Questions for discussion:

1. What do you suggest to get Tecumseh back on track?
2. How would you communicate its new safety features to the public, if at all?
3. How would explain Singh’s continued employment to the media?
4. Would you reveal what Tecumseh is doing in its driver reviews?
5. Should Tecumseh do nothing in terms of communications and let the public forget over time?