



Indian Institute of Management Rohtak

**Teaching Note**  
No. IIMR-TN33-03/2026

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## **The Loss of Life: The Dilemma at IAL**

### **Abstract**

The case concerns a student's suicide at a large institution, which resulted in a major crisis and generated concerns about the institution's reputation. This case further brings up various issues such as responsibilities of higher education system and moral implications of handling a crisis.

### **Case Synopsis**

The current case centres on Ankur Bhatnagar, a student at the Institute of Advanced Learning (IAL), one of the best institutions in India, who committed suicide while studying an MBA. The incident raised awareness of potential structural and procedural flaws in the system as well as the responsibility of higher education institutions like IAL in addressing students' mental health concerns. Two days prior to the commencement of the Bizz Niti Business Summit (BNBS), an esteemed annual event held at IAL, the incident occurred. The voices emerging from IAL suggested that Ankur and the institute's administrative leadership had been at odds over the use of the BNBS logo for a considerable amount of time. According to the police inquiry into this occurrence, the matter had been resolved administratively 10 days before Ankur committed himself. The stakeholders were worried about this unanticipated and undesirable event. The case presents both strategic and ethical dilemmas for IAL. For instance, Should the organisation wake up to the need to review its long-standing internal procedures and systems or should it defend itself against the deterioration of its brand image? How can an institution like IAL navigate such a crisis? What could have IAL done to prevent such an unexpected event? How to encourage students to pursue challenging goals and objectives while also taking into account their mental health? How to manage stakeholders' expectations in such a crisis situation and respond to their queries appropriately?

### **Learning Objectives**

After reading and analysing the case, students will be able to ascertain the following in the context of higher educational institutions engaged in imparting professional career-oriented programmes:

- Realistic assessment of students' capability to balance between academic and non-academic activities.

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- Analyse institutional responsibilities during the mishaps like suicide committed by students.
- Comprehend that how an established well-reputed educational institution can handle the crises of such nature.
- Understanding and managing the expectations of stakeholders in academia during such crises.

Learning objectives	Theory used	Explication
LO1	Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984)	The theory suggests that the institution must create same value for every stakeholder involved. The institution just cannot think of its reputation in this context.
LO2	Ethical decision making model (Rest, 1986)	This framework suggested that the institution at the time of the event, functioned ethically towards the students or other stakeholders involved.
LO3	Situation crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007)	Including this theory, students can learn about the crisis communication in such incidents
LO4	Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and SCCT theory (Coombs, 2007)	By merging these two theories, students will learn that how to handle the stakeholders in the time of such crisis at institution.

### Appropriate Uses

This case was designed for postgraduate students in mental well-being and stress management, developing leadership competencies in higher education management, crisis management, and organisational behaviour.

### Teaching strategy in the session:

#### Planning the session (for 75 minutes class)

Stage	Time
Introduction and background	5 min
Case summary and facts including anecdotes	5 min
Discussion on question 1	10 min
Discussion on question 2	15 min
Discussion on question 3	15 min
Discussion on question 4	10 min
Discussion on question 5	10 min
Sum up and closure	5 min

## Assignment Questions

1. What prompted Ankur to take this step? Could he prevent this unfortunate situation?
2. Who can be held responsible in this case for Ankur's mental distress?
3. Should such events be completely led by students? What are other alternatives? What role the institute should play here?
4. How can Institute of Advanced Learning (IAL) facilitate its students to cope up with high pressure environment?

## Case Analysis

### (1) What prompted Ankur to take this step? Could he prevent this unfortunate situation?

The personality of Ankur Bhatnagar exhibits numerous characteristics indicative of Type A personality. The traits that define the individual, specifically his personality, may cause worry, fear, and stress (Uzum et al., 2022). Behavioural science characterises personality as the manifestation of variations in physical, mental, and spiritual traits influencing an individual's behaviour and lifestyle (Durna, 2005).

Individuals with Type A personalities are often highly motivated, competitive, self-critical, and possess a need to accomplish tasks immediately (Luthans, 1995). They may impose significant pressure on themselves to achieve perfection, believing that their failures constitute a substantial aspect of their identity. While these characteristics can occasionally correlate with success, they may also result in burnout, emotional fatigue, and, in severe instances, mental health crises stemming from insufficient support networks. What Ankur has faced, demonstrates the type A personality in him. In an educational setting, Ankur Bhatnagar might have countered some factors such as

- (a) Demonstrating the fear of failure
- (b) Experiencing challenges in achieving relaxation or sustaining a work/life equilibrium
- (c) Set impossibly high standards for themselves
- (d) Experiencing persistent stress and anxiety

Type B personalities, on the other hand, are thought to be more relaxed, calm, and able to control their feelings. Type B people are less impacted by stress that comes from within or that they put on themselves than Type A people.

The student Ankur Bhatnagar shows Type A personality traits since they are a perfectionist, are sensitive to academic or social assessment, and may not know how to deal with stress. Sadly, when there are barriers to getting psychological help and people are not aware of their own problems, personality traits like these can lead to very bad mental health outcomes, including suicide.

Ankur Bhatnagar's suicide raised a variety of questions about the administration of IAL, students' mental health, and event management at this high-profile education system. This case is complex because not only does it point to questions about the IAL system but also the mental health of individuals. There may have been multi levels of 'triggers' that prompted him to make this choice. Holland et al., (2017) found three primary categories which lead towards attempting suicide- academic, relationship and personal. Before the situation escalated, it had been noted he had differences in opinion regarding the use of the Bizz-Niti logo, but the issue was resolved a few days beforehand.

•**Administrative Burden:** Ankur Bhatnagar was under administrative and probably personal pressure in the organizing and hosting of events and the inclusion of outside guests for the exhibition. He was purportedly threatened with being blocked from receiving his degree, and there was a fair number of published judgments inferring grave incompetence by academics in

IAL. However, all administrative matters had been cleared and everything was moving smoothly.

•**Emotional support:** It is unclear to what degree Ankur Bhatnagar received professional emotional support from the institution during this dispute, but he may have suffered without psychological support from his daydream future-altering institution IAL.

•**Fear of Institute of Advanced Learning (IAL):** It is also probable that the potential academic penalty would increase his pain of the pressure being administered to him.

By availing the required support from the system, Ankur Bhatnagar could save himself from this tragedy.

- (i) **Mental Health Counselling:** If he had received regular check-ins or, stigma free counselling from experts or counselors, it probably could have saved him from this step.
- (ii) **Faculty Mentoring and Peer Support:** He could reach out to faculty and peer for support to alleviate his stress and avoid taking such drastic measures.
- (iii) **Role Restructuring of Bizz Niti team members:** He could reach out to other members of the organizing committee so that he could relieve himself of the responsibility or share the responsibility with a few others.
- (iv) **Talk to family members / close friends:** He could speak to his sibling/parents/ close friends about the issue that he was facing and seek their support in overcoming the same.

## (2) Who can be held responsible in this case for Ankur's mental distress?

The case shows that there are several levels of possible responsibility each of which offers a distinct way to learn. Certainly, institutional, and systemic breakdowns are key contributors to high-pressure academic environments, but it is equally important to consider how an individual relies on personal coping choices and tactics. In the instance of Ankur Bhatnagar, certain personal choices and psychological tendencies may have contributed to his unfortunate death such as

- (a) **Absence of help-seeking behaviour:** Despite going through an extremely stressful period, Ankur Bhatnagar did not consistently appear to utilize mentors, counsellors, and support systems inside or outside the institution. The avoidance of seeking help could indicate either the social stigma associated with mental health, especially for male study from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds or an internalized belief that seeking help is associated with failure or weakness.
- (b) **Perfectionism and Fear of Failing:** Ankur Bhatnagar may have adopted a perfectionist mind-set or a fear of disappointing loved ones. When someone fails or performs poorly, this pressure might distort his sense of self-worth and drive thought errors.
- (c) **Inability to manage Academic meets:** While academic rigor is difficult and challenging, some students can deal with it academically, some cannot, Ankur Bhatnagar may not be able to adopt coping mechanisms or he may not want to, either way, it may speak to a personal gap in emotional resilience or emotional adaptation.
- (d) **Emotional Isolation:** Perhaps Ankur Bhatnagar had ignored his mental health and allowed internalised thoughts to grow uncontrolled, resulting in mental exhaustion and hopelessness.

However, IAL could not completely absolve its responsibility in such matters. For instance, if mental health is not considered in policies, communication, and staff behaviour, this is a procedural issue. The person providing the service must communicate with the students in a respectful but logical manner. Disrespectful or threatening behaviours, especially when students are in a vulnerable state, can bring their morale down. Administrators should have been professionally dealt with the situation. In IAL's case, when dealing with important events, it is suggested that faculty members/coordinators are brought to picture. Lastly, IAL should take

more responsibility for looking after students' mental health by working with professional Counsellors.

**(3) Should such events be completely led by students? What are other alternatives? What role the institute should play here?**

Student-organized events are essential components of the culture and experiential learning opportunities at premier educational institution like the IAL. The recent tragic suicide of Ankur Bhatnagar, student coordinator of Bizz Niti at Institute of Advanced Learning (IAL), underscores the necessity to assess the way these duties are assigned and the extent of support offered. This case study contrasts two models: student-led event execution and outsourced event management, with a specific emphasis on student mental health and welfare, institutional responsibility, and educational outcomes.

Although IAL must provide adequate institutional support systems (such as professional mentors, mental health, changeable deadlines, etc.) for students to manage, educational institution should continue to encourage student-led activities. However, while conducting these students led events, institution should make sure that students should be able to be psychologically strong and ready to assume high-stakes leadership roles, and participation in these events should remain optional.

**Student-led Model: Pros and Cons**

This model facilitates the students to get the hands-on leadership, project management, budgeting, entrepreneurial thinking, and stakeholder's communication to enhance the skills in their resume. Moreover, it builds the resilience and emotional intelligence in students to work under pressure. However, student led model lacks structured guidance and some students feel burdened especially in high performing environments. If events do not go as planned, students may be blamed leading to emotional trauma.

**Out-sourced Model: Pros and Cons**

Events are managed by outsource parties without including students. As results students do not engage in stress and workload activities. This model easily handles the crisis and compliance risks. This model can make students feel disconnected from the execution and can restrict the student exposure to the real world. The story of Ankur Bhatnagar unambiguously illustrates that institutions must reassess the extent of responsibility assigned to students in the absence of support services. Leadership experiences are essential for students, but they should not compromise their well-being and health.

**(4) How can IAL facilitate its students to cope up with high pressure environment?**

The case of Ankur Bhatnagar highlighted issues regarding academic pressure, psychological stress and some possible shortcomings of educational institution system like IAL with respect to students' mental health that they do not state loudly. The underlying issue in the case was IAL inability to effectively attend to mental health of students especially under academic and social stressors. Alcohol abuse (23%), substance misuse (23%), social isolation (27%), and mental illness (47%), according to the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide (NCISH), were prominent causes of youth suicides in England (McLaughlin & Gunnell, 2021).

In using a theoretical perspective- Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus,& Folkman, 1984), IAL to identify and evaluate these phenomenological stressors. This theory explains how humans interpret and respond to the stress and it particularly examine the ecological interactions between individual and the environment. The study posits as individuals appraise, and then the appraisal is followed by deployment of coping strategies to regulate the relationship between stressors and the outcomes appears to be important.

- (a) **Primary Appraisal:** Ankur Bhatnagar may have experienced academic difficulty, mental health challenges, or disconnection when he took this step. In this case, the role

of IAL is to mitigate identified stressors like high-stress environment, any different treatment of students or staff, or unclear communications).

- (b) **Secondary Appraisal:** Prior to the escalation of this incident, Ankur Bhatnagar may have thought he did not have effective coping resources like supportive peers, mentors or any counsellor for managing the mental pressure that he may have experienced for days or months, no one knows. Therefore, it is IAL's responsibility to inform students about the mental health resources which IAL has successfully implemented. It is not just about awareness; it's about the belief that those resources are effective and can be accessed in practical ways for students. In theory, the use of coping strategies could have saved Ankur Bhatnagar. If he was internalizing stress, in silence or withdrawing, these are signs of emotion-focused coping which often takes place when IAL has not provided a safe outlet. If institutions support positive health and problem focused coping strategies by appointing groups of peers, mentors and trained faculty members who are prepared to act as initial responders.

(c) This section highlights the insights from Transactional Model of Stress and Coping.

<b>IAL Responsibility</b>	<b>Action needed</b>
Eliminate significant stressor	IAL should identify and reduce the pressure of over achievement on students.
Development of resources to deal with mental stress	IAL must appoint more counsellors, peer/senior mentors and helplines with special training.
Encouragement of appraisal	IAL should now start assisting students in reframing obstacles.
Crisis management	IAL should establish unambiguous protocols for intervention and follow up.
Normalise help seeking	IAL should hold workshops, lectures, and campaigns about seeking help from others when it comes to mental health.

Institutions must provide more than just reactive help for students dealing in high-stakes situations. Systems must design proactive, systemic reactions to protect and grow student resources, considering the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. This theory helps in understanding how people respond to the stress when there is loss of resources. The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, developed by Stevan E. Hobfoll (2001), is a stress theory that emphasizes how individuals attempt to obtain, retain, and protect resources they consider valuable. Resources are valued by individuals which might be objects, personal attributes, conditions, or energies, or serve to achieve other goals.

Resources can be divided into the following categories (Seguin, 2016)

- (i) **Object:** These resources are valuable due to their physical nature or the object's potential to gain status for the owner. They are concrete need for fundamental survival. Tangible possessions are prime examples of object resources.
- (ii) **Conditions:** Condition resources are desired states of being. For instance, having a supporting social network, possessing status, membership in organisations, and having consistent employment.
- (iii) **Personal:** Personal resources include one's perspective on the world. It can involve having self-assurance and an optimistic outlook on life.
- (iv) **Energy:** Lastly, knowledge, money, and time are examples of energy resources. Despite their low inherent value, these are valuable because they make it easier to obtain more resources.

In Bhatnagar case, following resources loss can be observed such as

- Loss of scholarly confidence, deficits in support, and feelings of social judgment could all be losses of resources.
- Students like Ankur Bhatnagar may experience a downward approach if they are unable to seek counselling, social assistance, or other institutional tools to refill their resources.
- The theory highlights that for students to cope with hardship and disappointments in an efficient manner, educational institutions must help them develop and preserve their social and psychological resources.

Given the Ankur Bhatnagar scenarios, IAL could use the three-stage crisis model to provide its transparent role in dealing with these crises (Coombs, 2011).

**Pre-Crisis Stage (Prevention and Preparation)** - During this phase we are determining what the hazards are, how to prevent the accident spins out of control and support systems needed. During a conflict situation between student and administration, IAL could have further intervened in the situation through:

- Writing clear guidelines regarding roles, responsibilities, use of copyright (usage of logo), and institution's limitations of events while organising such types of events.
- All scheduled events of the institute should have a Faculty Coordinator(s). The students of the organizing committee of such events should avoid conflict with administrative staff by availing mediating support from the Faculty Coordinator(s) of the event.
- Periodic updates to be provided to the Faculty Coordinator(s) regarding the progress and bottlenecks, if any, for appropriate resolution.

**Crisis Stage (During the Incident)**

- A quick review process of the situation and making interventions with the opportunity of reaching a satisfactory resolution
- A faster response from a faculty team made for this purpose could potentially reduce the possibility of an untoward event
- Provide emotional support response mechanisms to the students by professional counsellors, peer group, close friends, parents, and siblings etc. when they display symptoms of mental distress.

**Post Crisis Stage (Healing and Learning)**

- IAL should develop and institutionalize appropriate response mechanisms by incorporating policies in order to avoid mishaps or crises of such nature in future.
- Provide counselling for students and team members who experience trauma followed by Ankur's suicide on campus.
- Policy changes in terms of clearly defining the boundaries for organizing committees, administrative staff, engaging and dealing with external parties and agents, steps for escalated conflict resolution, and the role of Faculty Coordinator(s) in the context of such events.
- Establish and maintain suggestion schemes and grievance redressal cell for students with the help of the office of Student Affairs.
- Periodic group interaction of the Director, Deans, Programme Chairpersons with the students.

**Key Takeways:**

- How an institution or organization communicate in the time of crisis affects its reputation among its beneficiary parties.
- Students have certain obligations to their academic institutions because student safety is a component of institutional responsibilities.

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