

Getting the Word Out

Crisis Plan Prevents a Bad Situation from Getting Worse

By Jonathan Lehrer

The story is all over the cable news and headlines dominate the front pages. A gaggle of news reporters is waiting for a comment from your chief executive.

A crisis may be impossible to avoid, but proper preparation can help prevent a bad situation from getting worse. Unattended or improperly handled, a crisis can threaten the organization's credibility, reputation, and in its most extreme form—its survival or, at a minimum, the survival of its leadership.

By withholding information or covering up the truth, a company can ruin its reputation forever.

Define a 'Crisis'

A crisis is any event – accidental or intended – that has or could have an adverse effect on an organization's reputation and business.

- Incidents including serious injury, death and/or property damage
- Labor relations issues
- Major weather-related problems
- Allegations of mismanagement
- Abrupt change in leadership
- Allegation of employee misconduct
- Workplace violence
- Acts of terrorism
- Potential financial crisis

Any crisis may quickly escalate if improperly managed.

Put Someone in Charge

Crisis planning is a dynamic process that requires frequent revisiting, rewriting and retraining. In many organizations the public relations, communications or legal departments may be in charge. Often, an outside consulting firm is used for assistance.

Ensure that one person is in charge of keeping the plan up-to-date.

Set Goals for Handling the Crisis

Before beginning your crisis preparation, clarify your organization's goals. They should include protecting employees and their families, serving the public and/or your customers or key stakeholders; safeguarding your financial and capital assets; and protecting your investors.

Plan...Team...Training

Preparing for a crisis is a complex and time-consuming process. Essential elements include writing and maintaining a Plan Document; creating a Crisis Response Team; and training key personnel.

Make a Plan

The crisis communications plan is just as important as the project's blueprint. The crisis plan outlines procedures that will secure the welfare and safety of the public and workers.

Elements of a crisis communications plan include:

- Statement of policy regarding crisis communications
- Procedures and telephone numbers for contacting police, fire and EMT personnel
- Monitoring and record-keeping system
- Corporate communications coordination
- Spokesperson guidelines
- Sample questions that may be asked by reporters
- Procedures for contacting employees and their families
- Contact information for the Crisis Response Team and other key executives, including mobile phone and e-mail addresses – be sure to include after-hours and "private" contact information

Form a Crisis Response Team

The Response Team is the group that will actually manage the crisis as it unfolds, often consisting of staff from several departments:

- Executive office
- Public Relations
- Legal
- Operations

In many cases, it's best to split the team: An "onsite group" will travel to the site of the incident immediately. A "home group" should convene in the office or another location away from the site of the incident.

Arrange (ahead of time, of course) for a conference call facility to allow the two teams to exchange information.

It's essential to have back-ups for all Crisis Team members, in case the main team members are not available.

Train Your People

Few people were born with the ability to improvise concise statements in front of a TV camera. Several people in your organization should be trained to make official statements in the event of a crisis.

Outside consultants usually are brought in for media training. They will typically show videotape examples of good or poor handling of a crisis, discuss how to create talking points on the fly and practice speaking in front of the camera. Scenarios that depict possible crisis situations are often used for practice.

Make Connections

Crisis Team members should be equipped with the best communications technology available. They will need access to your organization's media contact list, templates for creating and issuing press releases, up-to-date background information on the organization and an ability to make updates to your Web site from the field.

PDAs, notebook computers with wireless Internet access and fully charged cell phones are critical tools.

News Media: Partner, Not Enemy

Too often, it's the CEO vs. the media in a kind of battle that doesn't end well for anybody.

The media are just doing their jobs, keeping the public informed. When you need to ask for public cooperation in responding to the crisis, the media will be more helpful if you are respecting their thirst for information. Treat them as a partner, not an enemy.

The author co-founded the Message Engineers and is president of Jonathan Lehrer Communications, Inc., providing public relations and crisis communications planning to government agencies, non-profit organizations and business. Learn more at www.message-engineers.com. Louis Pukelis contributed to this article.