

Crisis Communications: Avoidance vs. Action

By Barbara Lezotte, APR

To suddenly find one's organization in the glare of an unwanted media spotlight is a nightmare most CEOs say they would go to great lengths to avoid. Yet avoidance is only possible under specific circumstances and through careful preparation; otherwise, it is a hopeless and rather foolish strategy. More on that later.

Reporters and editors don't take no for an answer, nor should they when an issue impacts the community. They are trained to get the story, if not from the original source of the news, then from related ones -- past or present employees, customers, and others with varying degrees of factual information.

The issues that could land an organization on the front page or at the top of the 6 p.m. TV newscast are multitudinous. Pick any that could apply to your particular corporation, association, nonprofit or government agency: alleged financial fraud; environmental harm; accidents; consumer lawsuit; employee misconduct; unintentional negligence of any kind which caused injury, illness or even embarrassment. The list could go on and on.

Communicating throughout an organizational crisis is unfortunately not a science, but an art, in which experience and understanding of the potential for harm to the organization and appropriate action help bring about more positive outcomes. The variables in each situation make flexibility critical and demand the leader's focus and sometimes total attention. He or she bears the inherent responsibility to anticipate and plan for crisis. It doesn't matter that crisis has never occurred in many years of a successful operation. In fact, if that's the case, all the more reason to prepare. It's probable that the 50 that were planned for will bear no resemblance to the one that eventually hits.

Planning involves thinking through the potential vulnerabilities for the organization, as well as assessing the ability of leadership to respond. In times of crisis, when the organization's reputation is on the line, the public and the media expect to hear from the top person. To delegate to lesser levels of authority demonstrates a lack of concern and sends a potentially negative message.

So when the CEO or top executive is suddenly spending every hour responding to media calls and interviews, who will keep the operation running? Who will communicate with other critical audiences? Will those organizations and individuals be offended if they don't hear from the top person? How will what is reported in the media affect the day-to-day operations?


A crisis plan includes more than simply identifying and training the organization's spokesperson. It is akin to an emergency response drill. The pressure, stress and shock of a media crisis make clear thinking difficult and allow little time to present a credible response. Television cameras arrive with little warning and are not easily turned away. Print reporters are relentless when they smell scandal or cover-ups. With no preparation, those on the firing line can easily and inadvertently make unfortunate statements.

Although on-camera training is a must for every executive with spokesperson-level authority, responding to the media is just one piece of a crisis communication strategy. The long-term reputation of the organization will survive, be tarnished or be demolished not only based on what the media report, but also through perceptions drawn from other credible sources.

Now, back to that avoidance strategy and when it works. Attempting to avoid news reporters is not an option after news breaks. Lack of communication only serves to reinforce the public's and media's belief in the allegations, whatever they might be and no matter how far-fetched. An implausible story suddenly takes on considerable credence when the organization refuses to comment or the paper is able to write, *"CEO John Doe did not return several phone calls,"* or *"President Jane Smith was unavailable for interviews, according to her assistant."*

The only time to avoid a media crisis is before there's ever a hint of one. In other words, figure out what issues or actions could cause your organization to make headlines and take steps now to prepare and prevent. Make necessary changes in areas of vulnerability. Verify assumptions regarding product integrity, community concerns and employee conduct and make corrections. Bring in an outside expert to help identify and prepare for the worst case scenarios.

Which will you go to great lengths to avoid? The media? Or the negative publicity? Now's the time to decide.



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