Will You Be Ready when Disaster Strikes?

If you don't have a crisis plan in place, you're looking for trouble.

BY LOLITA HENDRIX

At a recent convention, the presenter asked how many attendees had an updated crisis plan in their office files. Only two of the 50 nonprofit directors in the audience raised their hands.

When probed further, nearly everyone said they recognized the need for a crisis plan but hadn't prepared one—mainly because they didn't know how to go about it. Many weren't sure what "crisis communications" really means.

Focus on Communication, Preparation, and Prevention

So let's start with a definition. *PR Newswire*, a public relations publication, calls crisis communications "today's jargon for an ancient problem: in an emergency, how do you tell those who must know on the outside what really is happening on the inside? How do you do it quickly, accurately, in your own town or across the nation?"

That's a good definition, but it addresses only half the problem. The other half is to prevent crises from occurring in the first place.

Arlene Southern, a public relations professional, once said, "A good PR program is like a guardrail on a cliff, not an ambulance at the bottom." Your first step, then, is to build a good guardrail.

Build a Guardrail

Begin by holding brainstorming sessions with staff members. Have them broach everything they can imagine going wrong with the organization—allegations of sexual abuse, natural disasters such as fires and tornadoes, mishaps that may or may not include human error. Encourage everyone in the organization to participate, since each will bring a different perspective. The human resources director may think along the lines of employee-related disasters, for example, while the accountant is likely to highlight financial-related crises.

Next, discuss ways you might avoid each of these problems. For example, are prospective employees screened adequately? Are budgets and spending procedures monitored properly? Are all employees aware of the organization's policies? Remember, preventive measures work only when enforced by every member of the staff.

Anticipate the Inevitable

No matter how effective your preventive measures are, you can't avoid all crises. Therefore, you must prepare a plan that addresses disasters with a high likelihood of occurring.

Again, gather all staff members. Go over your list of things that might go wrong. Get a consensus on five disasters most likely to occur despite preventative measures.

Next, create a list of questions that people (the media, board members, clients, and other stakeholders) will likely ask when they hear a crisis has occurred. For example:

- What happened? Where and when?
- Are there injuries or deaths as a result? How many and to whom? (Avoid releasing names until family and legal counsel have been contacted.)
- Have police or other emergency services been contacted? What is their progress? (Don't speculate. Let the proper authorities address this issue.)
- How and why did this situation occur? (Don't speculate. Tell what you know for sure and nothing else.)
- Are there regularly practiced precautions to prevent this situation? Were they violated?
- May I have a description of your organization and the services you provide?
- How much is this going to cost the organization?
- Do you have insurance?
- Do you need donations from the community?
- Has your organization ever faced a similar situation? How was it handled?

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- How long has the employee in question worked here? Were there problems with this employee before?

Form Contact Lists

List everyone who will need to be contacted when a crisis occurs. Put this list on the first page of your crisis communications plan and on cards for key staff to carry in their wallets.

List names in priority order. Include all contact numbers such as home, office, cellular, pager, e-mail, and fax. Don't assume all crises will occur when everyone is working. Some happen after employees have left for the day. Others take place in the middle of the night.

It's important for all emergency personnel and key staff and board members to be contacted as soon as possible after a crisis occurs. Everyone will need time to prepare for what is to come. Hunting for telephone numbers wastes precious time.

Record Events

Your crisis plan should contain forms to use to record the event. All people with even the least bit of involvement should write down what they experienced.

Each person should complete a form separately, and as soon as possible after the event. Details can be erased from minds as time passes.

The forms should be collected and held for safekeeping. If a lawsuit is later filed, the forms will prove invaluable. They may also be useful to the police or other emergency personnel and insurance companies.

Forms should include the following information (but leave blank pages to record details not covered here):

- What happened?
- Who learned of the incident first? When? What did that person do next? Whom did they contact?
- Where did the incident occur?
- When was the executive director notified? By whom?
- When were the police and medical authorities notified? By whom?
- Were there injuries? How serious? How were they treated?

Communicate with Families of Victims

One of the most difficult tasks is communicating a crisis to the families of victims. This responsibility should be taken very seriously and assigned to a person with strength and compassion. This person may or may not be the executive director; it should be someone who isn't needed to handle other aspects of the crisis at the organization.

Send this representative to the victim's home—or in cases of less serious injury, prepare the person to telephone the family. Here are details this person needs to keep in mind:

- Act quickly! It's important for families to know that their loved one has been injured as soon as possible. It's also important that they hear about the situation from you—not from a reporter knocking at their door or broadcasting the 6:00 news.
- Tell the family what, where, when, why, and how the injury occurred and where the victim was taken. If the information isn't available, say so and why. Never speculate on injuries. Let doctors supply medical information.
- Clear all information with the organization's leaders, legal counsel, and medical personnel.
- Tell the truth! If the injury occurred because the organization was negligent, be prepared to accept responsibility. Trying to hide the truth will only lead to greater problems.
- Be ready for severe emotional reactions. Consider contacting the family's physician or clergy if needed.
- Maintain contact with the organization for new developments.
- Help the family in every way possible. Offer transportation to the hospital or care for young children in the home until other family arrives.
- Be prepared to stay at the family's home for as long as necessary.

Communicate with Employees

Employees of the organization will also experience anxiety during crises and should be informed of the situation as soon as possible. It's important to keep employees abreast of developments to prevent the spread of rumors. The faster news comes from official sources, the less speculation there will be about what's happening.

Emphasize to employees that they should refuse to speak with the media about the crisis. They should refer all questions to the chosen spokesperson. This will allow the organization to speak with one voice and prevent conflicting messages.

Be Media Friendly

It's crucial to establish positive media relations before a crisis occurs. Call and introduce yourself. Take a reporter to lunch. The media often search for the kind of "warm and fuzzy" human interest stories and photo opportunities that nonprofits can provide. Reporters will be happy to get to know your organization. Then, if a crisis occurs at your organization, you'll have an established relationship to draw on—something that will make communicating with the media much more pleasant. It is easier to talk to a reporter and explain the details if mutual trust and respect exist.

How to Talk to Reporters

- **Prepare an "uh-oh list"**—the worst questions you can imagine a reporter asking. Craft careful responses for each one, and practice delivering them. *Suggestion:* Ask a colleague to play the relentless reporter using these questions.

- **Reverse the usual communication model**—introduction, supporting data, and conclusion. Instead, state your conclusion—your message—first. Follow with anecdotes, examples, and facts, and then repeat your message.

- **Comply with today's sound-bite requirement** by limiting answers to 30 seconds. Anything longer means that your message—and reporter's interest—may be lost.

Source: Lisa Grider writing in *Currents,* Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, cited in *Communication Briefings*, 1101 King Street, Suite 110, Alexandria, Virginia 22314.

Select a Media Spokesperson

One of the most dreaded parts of handling a crisis is communicating with the media. But before communications begin, you must decide who will act as the official spokesperson in the event of a crisis.

In some nonprofits, the logical spokesperson is the executive director. But don't make the mistake of overlooking others because they lack decision-making responsibilities. The person with authority can explain the organization's position to the spokesperson, who can convey it to reporters.

Survey the staff, and you may discover an excellent communicator. The main thing to remember is that spokespeople should have the following qualities:

- They should be committed to telling the truth. When organizations make mistakes, the public can be surprisingly forgiving—if the organization admits responsibility and demonstrates remorse.
- They should be quick-witted and able to respond intelligently to unexpected questions.

- They should not speak hastily. They should think about what they're going to say (and how it will be received) before responding to questions.
- They must be comfortable speaking before large crowds, and into microphones and television cameras.
- They should be people who are perceived as trustworthy and sincere.
- They should be polite and even-tempered, with a sense of humor. They should never, ever, get into a heated exchange with reporters.

Avoid the phrase "no comment."

Prepare to Communicate with the Media

Once you've selected the appropriate person, use the following tips to prepare the spokesperson for the job ahead.

- Use the list of likely questions you prepared earlier (see "Anticipate the Inevitable" on page 32), and draft logical, well-thought-out answers based on the current crisis.
- Conduct mock media interviews. Have staff members play the role of "hungry" reporters firing questions at the spokesperson. You'll give the spokesperson valuable experience and let everyone see how effective the prepared responses are. Some responses appear wonderful on paper and foolish before a crowd.
- Respond to media inquiries as quickly as possible. Reporters have deadlines and need to obtain information instantaneously. If it's a big crisis, reporters will write a story with or without your organization's help. Even if you can't give reporters the information they need, have your spokesperson talk to them and tell them the situation.
- Avoid the phrase "no comment." It sounds as if the organization has something to hide. If you can't comment on a question, say so and why. Perhaps you don't have the information. Or police have asked you not to release certain information. Or laws regarding minors prevent you from discussing certain matters. Say so. Reporters are familiar with these situations and will understand.

Take the Next Step

Now that you've skimmed this article and made some mental notes, it's time to place it on the shelf for later reference, right?

Not so fast. While this approach is tempting and may save time now, its results could be disastrous for the future.

Instead, start today to prepare your crisis plan. Having a detailed crisis communications plan in place will be invaluable when crises occur. Remember, too, that half the job is preventing crises in the first place—by having effective policies, communicating with all your stakeholders, and establishing good relations with media people.

Don't wait till disaster strikes. Start today, while minds are clear. ■

The 10 Best Ways to Avoid a Public-Relations Nightmare

1. **Prepare written organizational policies,** including:
   - an employee handbook
   - policies for screening potential employees (including volunteers)
   - anti-discrimination and harassment policies
   - financial control systems
   - an ethics policy
2. **Be sure all employees** (including volunteers) understand the organization's policies.
3. **Create a written crisis plan,** clearly stating what will be done and who will do it in case of a crisis. Make sure your plan includes:
   - names and contact numbers of people to contact in an emergency
   - a list of questions you're likely to be asked by the media and other stakeholders in a crisis
   - forms to record the details of what happens in a crisis
   - details on who will communicate what to whom
   - your goals for effective crisis communications—the outcomes you hope for and how you will measure success.
4. **Build trust and respect** with local media representatives.
5. **Appoint someone to communicate** with the media and someone to meet with victims' families in case of an emergency. Choose these people *before* a crisis occurs. They should know what's expected and be ready to swing into action at the first hint of a problem.
6. **Keep communication lines open** between your organization and its stakeholders at all times.
7. **Hold frequent brainstorming and roleplaying sessions**. Encourage all staff to participate, and be open to all their ideas.
8. **Accept the blame** when your organization makes an error. Let the public know what you're doing to be sure the problem isn't repeated.
9. **Always tell the truth.**
10. **Don't wait till a crisis occurs** before implementing these ideas. Begin today to prevent the preventable and prepare for the inevitable.

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center (608-274-9777).

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