A
Triad Strategies
White Paper

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Crisis Communications

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Sooner or later, virtually all municipalities have to deal with an unfolding situation that can be classified as a crisis, and which prompts a public response. These can range from storm and blizzard events to incidences of employee malfeasance or misconduct. This White Paper will focus upon the three primary elements of crisis communications: pre-crisis planning, crisis response and post-crisis actions.

WHAT IS CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS?

A crisis is defined as a significant threat to an organization or its operations that can have a negative impact if not handled properly. Most crises can be divided into three potential categories or threats: 1) to public safety, 2) to financial integrity, or 3) to reputation. In many cases, all three of these threats will be interrelated and therefore warrant attention to each. Crisis communications is an essential component of crisis management, which is a process designed to prevent or lessen the damage a crisis can inflict upon a municipality, its officials and its citizens.

PHASE I—Pre-Crisis Planning

Pre-crisis planning is designed to allow crisis response teams to react faster and more effectively to whatever situation may arise. Universally accepted best practices for the pre-crisis stage include:

1. **Have a crisis management plan (an inherent part of which is a crisis communications plan) and update it at least annually.**
   A crisis management plan incorporates many different aspects of an organization's operations and assets. It begins with brainstorming various scenarios of crisis that may affect your municipality and how you would respond to each instance. A good plan includes step-by-step protocols on who would be notified, how they would be notified and what actions should be taken sequentially. Substantial effort should be invested in developing contact and resource lists for the plan, with 24-hour contact information a critical part of any notification list. Other data could include mutual aid companies for fire and police, lists of tree removal and towing companies, water suppliers, utilities, other municipal staff and news media.
2. **Have a trained and designated crisis management team.**
   The composition of a crisis management team can vary from organization to organization, but at the municipal level it should always include the highest ranking elected official (mayor, chairman of board of supervisors or council), the highest ranking appointed official (manager, business administrator), police, fire and EMS chiefs, public relations and legal representative (preferably solicitor or other legal counsel). Depending upon the nature of the crisis, other individuals that can be brought on to the team include the public works or human resources directors, treasurer, etc. A key member of this team will be the person designated as the spokesperson.
3. **Conduct a table-top exercise at least once a year to test the plan and team.**
   Nothing provides greater confidence and performance than practice – whether its rehearsing a speech before a presentation or spending hours in a batting cage before stepping up to the plate. Practicing your crisis management plan gives team members greater confidence in their tasks and abilities, illuminates potential weaknesses in the plan and fosters greater cooperation and understanding of the varied tasks you and your team members will be expected to carry out.
4. **Pre-draft select crisis management messages and have them reviewed by attorneys before they are issued.**
   Team members should brainstorm the various crisis scenarios they could foresee impacting their municipality and draft sample statements or news releases addressing each. These documents should be reviewed by your municipal solicitor or other legal advisers for potential liability issues prior to their actual use. Pre-drafting such messaging and having it reviewed by team management and lawyers will exponentially speed your response capabilities if and when it ever needs to be implemented.

PHASE II—Crisis Response

Initial crisis response guidelines focus upon three main points:

1. Be Fast—Responding within the first hour is preferred but the reality is you may not even have all of the necessary information that quickly. So as soon as humanly possible is the general rule. Never let more than six or more hours pass before some sort of response is issued. Never, ever let an entire day go by without providing some manner of response.
2. Be Accurate—Accuracy is always important. Inaccuracies make an organization look inconsistent, or worse, incompetent. If mistakes are made they must be corrected. The practice of having one primary spokesperson or one voice in a crisis is the best way to maintain accuracy throughout the life of a crisis.
3. Be Consistent—Having one spokesperson helps to maintain consistency, but it is just as important to have all members of a crisis management team fully briefed on what or how the team will respond. The reality is that news media will seek out multiple sources during a crisis, so having everyone on the same page and familiar with your messaging points will provide assurance that your response is consistently communicated.

Additional Best Practices for crisis response include:

- Ensuring public safety is the top priority.
- Using all available communications channels for response – news media, mass emails, website postings, social media outreach, etc.
- Expressing sympathy or concern for victims or those impacted.
- Including employees as a messaging audience in the initial response.
- Being ready to provide stress and trauma counseling for victims, their families and employees, if warranted.

How do you respond?

Assuming you've done all of the pre-crisis planning, have a trained and savvy spokesperson and are ready to step in front of the microphones, now what? What do you say? Follow this list of tried and true messaging points for guidance.

- Candor—Publicly acknowledge that a problem exists, that the public trust or confidence is affected and that something is being done to correct or remediate the situation.
- Explain—No matter how silly, stupid or embarrassing the cause, being honest is the best way to ensure continued public trust and confidence. Outline the behaviors or missteps that caused the situation, and discuss what has been learned as a result and how it will affect future such incidences.
- Declaration—Publicly outline what specific steps will be undertaken to prevent such occurrences in the future.
- Contrition—Verbalize regret, empathy or sympathy – even embarrassment. Take appropriate responsibility for having allowed situation to occur, whether by omission, commission, accident or negligence.
- Consultation—Promptly ask for help and counsel from victims, other agencies and community. Openly engage and ask for participation by those most directly involved to help find permanent solutions or acceptable behaviors.
- Commitment—Publicly set organizational goals of zero errors, dumb decisions or problems. Promise that your municipality will do everything in its organizational power to prevent it from happening again.
- Restitution—Figure out how to make victims whole and go beyond community or victim expectations or what would be required under normal circumstances.

What you should not say.

We have previously discussed the types of actions and steps that should be undertaken to successfully communicate in a crisis. In concert with those are types of behaviors (as communicated) are definite negatives that should be avoided by your spokesperson at all costs. These include:

- Showing arrogance or no concern
- Minimizing the impact or the needs of the victim
- Pointing fingers or shifting blame
- Broadening the situation to minimize the impact of this specific event
- Using inappropriate language
- Being inconsistent
- Making an inflammatory statement
- Not being prepared
- Missing opportunities to communicate with residents, constituents, stakeholders
- Not admitting responsibility
- Confusing victims

PHASE III—Post-Crisis

In the post-crisis phase, your municipality is returning to normal operations and the crisis is no longer the focal point of your organization and its management. Reputation repair may still be necessary and in many cases some follow-up will be required. Successful best practices for the post-crisis stage include:

1. Deliver all information promised to stakeholders as soon as possible.
2. Keep stakeholders updated on the progress of recovery efforts, the progress of any investigation into the crisis, and reveal what steps are being taken to correct or prevent the situation from occurring again.
3. Analyze the crisis management effort for lessons learned and integrate those findings into the municipality's crisis management plan and system .

SUMMARY

The 5 P's adage, *"Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance,"* is especially relevant in crisis management and crisis communications. Having a plan in place, practicing that plan and keeping it accurate and up-to-date are the keys to successfully mitigating or abating the many types of crisis that can affect your municipality. Knowing what you are going to do in the event of a crisis will give you greater confidence in your ability to respond and at minimum presents the appearance of professionalism and competence. As a municipal official, you must accept the fact that the public views you as a leader, and in times of crisis, the public wants and looks for leadership. Following these tips for effective communications in times of crisis will ultimately strengthen the public's faith and confidence in you and your municipality, and help foster their trust in you and your judgment in other matters of governance.