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What to do When the Sky Starts Falling: Crisis Management and Working with the News Media

Janine Reid

It's said that there are two types of companies—those that have already dealt with a crisis and those that will. Every company needs to be prepared for the inevitable. Staff members must be equipped with the skills necessary to portray their company in the best possible light while working under the worst possible circumstances.

CRISIS AUDIT

Natural Disaster

- Lightning
- Earthquake
- Extended severe cold/heat
- Extreme snow/ice conditions
- Flood/drought
- Hurricane/Tornado/Tsunamis

Operations

- Accident involving a company vehicle
- Bomb threat
- Data/telecommunications failure/loss of critical data
- Construction delay
- Cost over-run
- Design error/issue
- Explosion
- Fire
- Major utility failure
- Neighborhood/community group opposition to a project
- Structural/subsidence collapse

Environmental

Accidents/Liabilities

- Groundwater contamination
- Air quality problem
- Gas leak
- Long-term exposure of toxic chemicals to the community
- Release of toxic chemicals into the air or waterways

Employee Safety and Health

- Chronic safety problem
- Exposure to carcinogens
- Injury/fatality of an employee or non-employee
- Personal injury suit

- Regulatory citations

Labor Relations

- Negotiations
- Organizing drive
- Unfair labor practices
- Violent strike/work stoppage

Management Issues

- Bankruptcy
- Contractual dispute with client resulting in litigation
- Employee raiding by a competitor
- Loss of key customer
- Crisis in the same industry
- Someone else's crisis on your property (guilt by association)
- Kidnap, ransom, extortion
- Hostile takeover attempt
- Key employee starts competing company
- Management succession
- Merger/acquisition
- Negative publicity due to rumors
- Negative publicity relating to political contributions
- Death of owner or key employee
- Reorganization/downsizing
- Serious cash flow problems
- Sudden market shift
- Suicide
- Terrorism

Employee/Management

Misconduct

- Bribery/kickbacks
- Disgruntled employee
- Executive misconduct/fraud/embezzlement
- Lawsuits from discrimination, sexual/racial harassment
- Murder
- Price fixing
- Sabotage
- Scandal involving top management
- Slander
- Suicide
- Theft/Vandalism
- Workplace violence

Government Affairs

- Legislation that could affect business

SUGGESTED CONTENT FOR A CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

SECTION	DESCRIPTION
FIRST HOUR RESPONSE CHECKLIST	Areas to be covered immediately upon notification of a crisis.
CONTACTS	People to be called immediately in the event of an emergency. Also included are names and numbers for “other” contacts such as office personnel, insurance, legal and governmental agencies.
INJURY/FATALITY	Procedures for family notification for injury/fatality.
BOMB THREATS/WORKPLACE VIOLENCE/ NATURAL DISASTERS	Procedures for what to do in the event of bomb threat or workplace violence issue. Also include FEMA recommendations on what to do in the event of a flood, hurricane, tornado or earthquake.
MEDIA	Pointers on how to work with reporters should they arrive.
COMMUNITY RELATIONS	Advice on working with the community when there is opposition to a project.
SAFETY	Detailed information on your company’s safety record.
PAST CRISES	Detailed information on all past emergency situations (in the event the media refers to them).
COMPANY BACKGROUND	An overview of your company.
PROJECT DATA SHEETS	Pertinent information on all major projects in-progress.
SUBCONTRACTOR EMERGENCY	Instructions on who does what.
FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXPERTISE	List of employees with foreign language expertise.

DO’S AND DON’TS OF WORKING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

DO talk. Saying little is better than saying nothing. Explaining why you can’t talk is better than stonewalling. If you want your side of the story told, you must tell it. If you don’t, reporters will get a version elsewhere...perhaps from a disgruntled employee that was laid off last week, or a worker who has just witnessed his best friend getting hurt or killed.

DO tell the truth. Reporters will find it out anyway so be honest and accurate when giving information. This doesn’t mean you have to give every

detail, but be truthful. If you don’t know the answer...say so! It’s not a crime to say “I don’t know” or “I’m not absolutely certain about that”...as long as you follow it up with “but I’ll find out and get right back with you.”

DO respond quickly. If you don’t, the wrong story might be told and that is tough to erase.

DO emphasize the positive and communicate your corporate message. Remember to emphasize the good safety measures taken, the minimal damage because of good teamwork by your employees, and the steps the company is taking to minimize the effect of the emergency on the community.

DO stay away from liability issues. Don’t talk about who is responsible, don’t make any accusations, and don’t give out company or individual names. Whatever you say could become part of a legal issue, so be as general as possible.

DO take control. If there is bad news, release it before a reporter digs it up and tells the world.

DO create visual analogies. The old saw “a picture is worth 1,000 words” applies here. Examples are powerful as well, e.g. “The affected area covers 40,000 sq. ft, which is the approximate size of.....”

DO condense your information. Remember, the average soundbite is 7.3 seconds. Try to keep your response to no more than three sentences. The first sentence should be your direct response and the next one to two sentences will support/explain your response.

DO make sure your information is accurate. It should come from a reliable source and you should understand the details thoroughly.

DO make sure the reporters know the spokesperson. The corporate spokesperson should be the only person authorized to disseminate information to the outside world. It is very important that you “speak with one voice.” Keep in mind that no information should be released without being approved by upper management and legal counsel.

DON'T say “no comment.” This statement implies guilt. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell the reporter you don't know, but will try to find out. If the question leads to an embarrassing answer, give as much information as you can in as positive light as possible. If you make a mistake, admit it. Avoid excuses. Explain how you're planning to make things right.

DON'T be trapped into predicting the future... NEVER speculate!

DON'T say anything “off the record.” If you don't want it used, don't say it.

DON'T wear sunglasses when being interviewed. You'll be perceived as being “shifty” and hiding something.

DON'T discuss damages or estimated costs.

DON'T discuss any facts relating to insurance, such as amounts and terms of coverage, name of carrier, possibilities of settlements or reimbursements.

DO think before answering. Taking some time before you respond is perfectly acceptable. You're in control of your response...not the reporter. Don't allow reporters to rush you. If you don't understand the question, ask the reporter to rephrase it.

GETTING READY FOR THE INTERVIEW

Buy-time Statement

If the incident has just happened, you won't have any verifiable information to release to the news media. However, the media will expect some-

one to say something. Avoid the urge to stonewall the media while you're gathering facts. Instead, deliver what is called a “buy time” statement. This acknowledges the situation but doesn't really divulge any information. It goes something like this:

“My name is Doug Anders and I'm the Project Manager for XYZ Construction Company. The incident has just happened and I am not prepared to answer any questions at this time. Please stay in this safety area so we can do our job and take care of the situation. As you can see, I'm pretty busy right now and need to return to the site, but either (spokesperson) or I will be back by (time) with an update. Thank you.”

You can count on the reporters pestering you for additional information, but you are not in a position to answer questions at this juncture. If a reporter starts asking you questions, simply say *“That's all I can confirm at this time. I'm sure you understand that we need to deal with the emergency at hand and gather some verifiable information for you. Thanks for your patience.”*

Remember, if you say you'll be back in 30 minutes, be there! Even if it's only to say that you still don't have any facts. You can usually get away with giving two “buy time” statements in the first few hours of a crisis. After that, you better have something to say.

Detailed Statement

As you receive information that has been verified by a trusted source, you'll need to live up to your promise of delivering that information to the news media. Always get your statements approved by upper management, and legal counsel if possible, before release. Here are some examples.

Example: Detailed Statement

“My name is _____. I'm (position) _____ with (Company). At approximately (time) _____, one of our workers accidentally hit an underground electric cable, disrupting service to _____. At this point, we have contacted the utility company, whose crews are on their way to repair the line. We don't know how extensive the damage is, but I'm sure the utility people will be able to provide you with those details once they review the situation.”

“The location of the line break is approximately _____.”

“Because our employees adhered to our strict safety policies, no one was injured

and there was no further damage to the area.”

“At this point, that's all the information I have. Our corporate spokesperson is on the way to provide you with further details, but right now all I ask is that you stay in this area, away from where the line break occurred, so emergency personnel and utility employees will be able to work on the line. We'll keep you posted on any further information.”

Example: Injury Statement

(Never release the name until the next of kin have been notified.)

“Joe Smith, 20, of San Francisco, California was injured Tuesday morning at 8:45 a.m. on the XYZ construction site in San Francisco. Smith, who is a carpenter apprentice for (Company), suffered multiple injuries as a result of the 30-foot fall. He is reported in critical condition at University Hospital in San Francisco. Right now, our focus is on Mr. Smith, his family, and cooperating fully with the investigation to find out exactly what happened. We will keep you advised of any further developments.”

Example: Fatality Statement

(Never release the name until the next of kin have been notified.)

“We are deeply saddened to report that Joe Smith, 20, of San Francisco died as a result of a fall that occurred Tuesday morning on the XYZ construction site in San Francisco. Smith, who was a carpenter apprentice for (Company), suffered multiple injuries as a result of a 30-foot fall. Our focus right now is on the family and friends of Mr. Smith as well as on the investigation of the accident.”

GET READY FOR QUESTIONS

Here are some questions that might arise. Also included are some possible responses.

What caused this accident? Possible response: *“The cause of the accident is not known at this time. A thorough investigation is currently underway and we will be better able to answer questions when the investigation is completed.”*

How many, and who, were injured/killed? Possible response: *“At this time we can confirm _____. I'm sure you'll understand that we cannot release any names until the families have been notified.”*

What is the estimated damage in dollars? Possible response: *“That infor-*

mation will not be available until the extent of the damage has been determined. We will be happy to share that information with you as soon as it becomes available."

Have you had any accidents in the past? What's your safety record? Possible response: "Right now, all of our resources are committed to the investigation. I'll be happy to gather that information and deliver it in our next update." (However, if you have a strong safety record, mention it.)

Will you step up your safety measures as a result of this accident? Possible response: "(Company) has had, and will continue to have, a strong safety program that is enforced by a full time safety director. There is no higher priority than the safety of our employees and those who work on the site."

Can we come on site to take pictures? Possible response: "Once the site has been secured, access will be determined by _____. We'll keep you informed of our progress."

I understand that this project is behind schedule. Do you think this accident was caused by pushing your workers too hard to make-up for lost time? Possible response: "Let me be very clear in saying that (Company) would never compromise safety for schedule." ★