

# Crisis Communications

*How individuals and organizations can navigate through a crisis*

By Napoleon Byars

Someone breaks into the home of a Department of Veterans Affairs employee and steals a laptop computer containing the files of approximately 26 million veterans.

Chinese toy manufacturers become the focus of a major international recall when millions of toys are pulled from store shelves in the U.S. because they contain harmful amounts of lead and other hazards.

A star NFL quarterback scrambles to avoid the blitz not by linebackers, but by a federal prosecutor with charges of illegal dog fighting.

A B-52 bomber takes off on a routine flight and lands hours later at its destination with its crew unaware nuclear weapons were aboard.

From manufacturing to sports to national defense, crises happen all around us every day. Sometimes crisis appear to worsen or to linger endlessly no matter how professional and prepared the key players were before things spun out of control.

But why do some crises generate more media attention and public outcry than others? How should individuals and organizations navigate the storm? What should you do when the s--- hits the fan?

The answer to these questions is often found in the actions or inactions of the people who operate at the center of the storm. Did they delay disclosure, communicate tentatively or with ambiguity? Did they speak directly to the interests of stakeholders involved? For certain, precise and timely crisis communication is a must for successful crisis management.

Webster defines crisis as, "A stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, for better or worse, is determined."<sup>1</sup> In other words, a crisis often builds and is made better or worse by the actions of those who are responsible for dealing with it.

A crisis is a time of great peril for organizations and individuals in which their very future and livelihoods are at stake. The most important step to realize in any crisis is that effective leadership along with sound decision making is necessary for survival—so is the counsel of a professional communicator. The role of a communicator is to be the advocate for an organization, frame messages to address the concerns of stakeholders, and help disseminate information to the media and the public. This will help promote trust and credibility.

In their book "Communication and Organizational Crisis," Matthew Seeger, Timothy Sellnow and Robert Ulmer write:

*Communication and organizational crisis intersect at many points.  
Communication is an on-going process that enables organizations to*

*monitor their environment before and during a crisis, to understand and respond appropriately, to construct a consistent interpretation, and to resolve the crisis and reestablish order...In crisis situations, overcoming the prevalent communication constraints is essential if organizations are to respond effectively. Poor communication or reticence can intensify the magnitude of a crisis to a point where recovery is impossible.<sup>2</sup>*

## **Getting the Facts Out**

The real value of a communicator does not begin with a crisis but is found in the time leading up to it. How well an organization manages the day-to-day and hour-to-hour relations between itself and key stakeholders often determines whether there is enough social capital in reserve to allow it to survive a crisis. Epistemology, axiology and ontology count when communicating with stakeholders and this is where public relations can make a difference.<sup>3</sup>

Crises often produce legal, financial and political fallout that negatively impact the operations of organizations. Some organizations look to communicators to perform magic during a crisis. If only the media would go away and stop asking questions the situation could be resolved without alarming the public. This is faulty thinking as traditional news media no longer exclusively control the gathering and distribution of news and information.

Communication is nearly instantaneous in the Internet Age of e-mail, instant messaging, video cams, blogs, and social networks. Whether instantaneous or viral, the spread of news about a crisis can severely damage the reputation and credibility of organizations.

It is important to understand that a crisis is not a public relations problem but a distinct event that must be addressed or resolved through appropriate action. However, rumor can initiate or intensify a crisis.

In her book "Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach" Kathleen Fearn-Banks writes that "Crisis can, and often do, begin with rumors. In fact, a crisis can actually be a negative rumor. 'Deep-sixing rumors is an important task in crisis control and crisis communications.'<sup>4</sup>

When the facts are equally troubling as rumors, the best course of action is to make them public quickly and not cover up. Cover-ups almost always lead to erosion in credibility and even high-trust organizations are not immune.

Recent research reveals that repairing the damage to organizational credibility can take anywhere from two to four years or longer, depending on the nature of the misstep in communication. Moreover, a loss in credibility can result in eroding public support, membership decline, and unmet fund-raising goals. The Catholic Church is still reeling from the damage to its reputation caused by the indiscretion of some of its priests and subsequent cover-ups, which came to light more than 15 years ago.<sup>5</sup>

Eroding credibility in the government's handling of the war in Iraq could one day seriously impact public support of national security programs and the amount of dollars devoted to defense.

In a February 2007 Gallup Poll, Americans were asked, “Do you think we are spending too little, about the right amount, or too much on national defense?” Only 20 percent said too little, 35 percent said about right, 43 percent responded too much, and two percent express no opinion.

What is significant about the poll results is that in 2003, before the war in Iraq began to unravel, the percentages of those responding about right and too much was reverse, with 44 percent believing spending was about right and 27 percent saying it was too much.<sup>6</sup>

## **Cause and Effects**

Professional communicators advise that a policy of prompt and maximum disclosure is the best course of action during a crisis. Transparency is vital to maintaining public trust and credibility with the media.

Determining the source of a crisis is important to successful resolution. Firemen arriving on the scene of an inferno check quickly to determine the nature of the blaze. Is it fueled by wood, flammable liquids, electrical wiring or exotic metals? Each class of fire requires a different approach to fighting. And each becomes even more complicated and unpredictable when people are trapped inside the flames.

The cause of crises can be grouped into four general categories—Acts of God, mechanical problems, human error, and management decisions or indecision.

Acts of God include natural disasters such as storms, tornados, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. News media coverage of damage and deaths caused by nature is fairly straightforward devoid of criticism. The mainstay of disaster reporting is the highlighting of the broken lives touched by the tragedy.

Media reporting on a crisis caused by an Act of God or mechanical failure will change precipitously from straight forward to critical if management is seen as untruthful, uncaring or incompetent. One only has to look to the reporting in the wake of Hurricane Katrina where government ineptitude became the focus of media coverage and soured public opinion.

Mechanical problems such as leaky piping, electrical overloads, overheating, etc., are found in the storylines of disaster reporting. When mechanical problems are unexpected the news media’s coverage is again straightforward and not critical of those involved.

Human error in a crisis runs the gambit from fatigue to confusion to miscalculations. A commuter train switches onto the wrong track and collides with a freight train. A doctor amputates the wrong leg of a patient. A pilot of a small plane taxiing to take-off misreads a runway marker and collides with a passenger jet.

Depending on the magnitude of the event, human error can result in intense media coverage that can help draw attention to other contributing factors so as to lessen the chance of the crisis recurring in the future.

When individuals are under great stress or danger, human error is often understandable. For example, the infrequent misconduct of soldiers long in

combat and far from home is viewed with less criticism by the society they are sworn to protect. The public is more likely to excuse a single transgression so long as the misconduct does not recur or become a pattern that assaults shared norms, values, and beliefs.

### **Media as Watchdogs**

The most intense and critical media coverage and public outcry occurs when the decisions or indecision of management help create or worsen a crisis. An attempt to cover up or withhold information from the public only adds to the problem and puts at risk the survival of management and, in the worse case scenario, the organization as well.

In the business world and in government, we expect a lot from the people in charge. When leaders make poor decisions or are indecisive, the public is much less forgiving and media attention is more intense. The role of the media in reporting on the missteps of government and business is not out of step with public expectation.

The Pew Research Center, an independent opinion organization that studies attitudes about the media, politics and public policy, has been tracking the public's view of the media for some time. In a report released on August 9, 2007, titled "Internet News Audience Highly Critical of News Organizations," Pew states:

While Americans often are critical of the way news organizations do their jobs, public support for the news media's role as a political watchdog has endured. In every Pew survey conducted since 1985, a majority has said that press criticism of political leaders does more good than harm. Currently, 58% say press criticism of political leaders is worth it because it keeps leaders from doing things that should not be done, while 27% believe criticism keeps political leaders from doing their jobs.<sup>7</sup>

The silver lining in every crisis—public or private—is the opportunity for individuals and organizations to improve their operations and relationships with the public. The Pew survey also revealed that 67 percent of people thought the news media paid too much attention to bad news. This is where public relations can help organizations navigate a crisis by pointing out the positive steps being taken to resolve the crisis. Public relations can also bring to light the positive contributions of organizations when appropriate.

Organizations and communicators would do well to recognize the eight news values that by and large determine what is considered to be news. Conflict, prominence, timeliness, proximity, impact, magnitude, oddity, and emotional impact are what attract audiences to news stories. These news values help drive media attention and the degree to which it remains on the crisis.<sup>8</sup>

## Effective Communication

The disclosure of 26 million missing data files certainly contains the news value of impact, magnitude and prominence, when considering almost everyone is related to or knows a veteran. The delay in informing veterans of what happened only fueled the crisis and portrayed officials as less than forthcoming about a serious matter.

The magnitude and emotional impact of toys coated with lead paint set off alarm bells for parents concerned about the safety of their children. The magnitude of the recall and widespread reach affected communities across the nation.

Michael Vick's guilty plea of involvement in illegal dog fighting contained elements of prominence, conflict, oddity, and emotional impact. It was timely, too, happening just prior to the start of the NFL's training camp and preseason.

Finally, the unintentional transportation of nuclear weapons aboard a B-52 contained elements of prominence, timeliness, impact, magnitude and oddity. The U.S. Air Force reluctantly admitted that for a time—hours reportedly—six nuclear missiles went unaccounted for. Something that officials had previously said never could happen, in fact did. Moreover, the delay in releasing details on the incidents increased media attention and elevated stakeholder concerns.

It is essential to practice effective communication during a crisis. The role of communicators should be more than disseminating information via news releases, press conferences and interviews. Certainly, the “who, what, when, where, how and why” of the crisis must be determined quickly in order to get the organization's story out.

Getting the facts out will help satisfy the public's need for accurate information. At the same time, communicators should address the current state of relationships with key stakeholders, and how the crisis is affecting them, so that management can make informed and better decisions. Only by doing these two things in concert will the media aspect of the crisis subside. ✦

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<sup>1</sup> *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* [New York, Random House, 1996] 477.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Seeger, Timothy Sellnow and Robert Ulmer, *Communication and Organizational Crisis* [West Port, CT, Praeger, 2003] 65.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lawrence Heath, *Handbook of Public Relations* [Thousands Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, Inc, 2001] 4.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Fearn-Banks, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach* [Mahwah, NJ, Laurence Erlbaum Associates, Inc, 2002/1996] 42.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Paulson, “Archdiocese set \$10.5m fund-raising goal,” *The Boston Globe*, April 30, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> “Military and National Defense,” *The Gallup Poll*, February 1-4, 2007 and February 3-6, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> “Internet News Audience Highly Critical of News Organizations Views of Press Values and Performance: 1985-2007,” The Pew Research Center, August 9, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Johnson Yopp and Katherine C. McAdams, *Reaching Audiences: a guide to media writing* [Pearson Education, Inc, 2003] 124-129.

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