

Maintaining Credibility During a Crisis: Challenges for the Manager

by Joseph Jarret

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hether your local government suffers a crisis born out of natural disaster or human error, citizen responses and public opinion will largely depend on how much time and effort you put into communication and education before the disaster occurred. The adage, “you can’t talk your way out of a crisis,” is as true today as it was when it was first uttered. And the time to educate people outside your local government is before a crisis happens.

Once the crisis occurs, most of your time will be spent communicating with citizens and the media—not a good time to attempt to educate anyone. Attempting to do so will seem like doublespeak and will detract from your efforts to resolve whatever led to the crisis in the first place. Also, in today’s integrated workplace, with its emphasis on a team approach to management, local government managers can no longer leave crisis communication to the public affairs office.

This article will explore various scenarios that managers can put into action to help their communities maintain credibility in the face of crisis.

A CRISIS DEFINED

A crisis is any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of your local government and that can be brought on by adverse or negative media attention. These situations include any kind of labor or legal dispute; theft; an accident leading to death, serious injury, or a public health violation; and natural disasters such as fires, floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes. In short, a local crisis can be caused by either nature or human errors, and local government becomes central if the crisis can be attributed to the community or the community needs to respond in some way.

Whether the crisis arises from human error or a natural disaster, any situation that causes the media or the general public to assert that your community failed to react appropriately can prove disastrous in terms of both reputation and citizen confidence. In an era when citizens and the media are demanding greater social responsibility on the part of government, every community needs to have a cogent, easily understood policy in place—one that is designed to meet head on the challenges a crisis brings. Since Hurricane Katrina, every local government manager can appreciate the need for a cogent crises communications plan.

FIVE STAGES OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Mark Towhey, president of Towhey Consulting Group, recommends that crisis management be broken down and addressed in five stages.

Stage 1. Containment: Take immediate action to prevent the situation from growing worse. Although crises are always different and unpredictable, many common elements consistently occur during the initial stages of any crisis: confusion, not enough information, people inside and outside government wanting or needing or demanding to know what's going on, and a rapidly changing situation. You will need to mobilize a response team, and you will need to alert authorities.

This is the stage you can plan in some detail. As part of your crisis management process, you should think hard beforehand about the containment stage, develop immediate response procedures, and train people to carry out these procedures until they become instinctive. You must be able to start containing at the earliest possible moment so that the crisis doesn't get worse. Containing the crisis buys a little time to assess the situation.

Any efforts your local government has exerted in an effort to raise citizen consciousness as well as faith, trust, and confidence in government will be for naught if it is perceived that the government's own rules, regulations, policies, and procedures are the problem and not the solution.

Stage 2. Assessment: Find out what's wrong and gather information needed to fix it. Emergency management organizations teach their crisis managers to think on their feet. It's important to have a process in place and skilled people available to gather information and assess the situation. Because every crisis is different, you will need to identify what information is required, gather it, interpret it, and draw conclusions. Your focus, in this stage, is on finding the crucial information needed to make decisions, identify your options, and create a plan.

Stage 3. Planning: Create a specific plan to resolve each specific crisis. Every crisis will be different and

every crisis will require a different resolution. Don't expect to be able to pull "Plan B" off the shelf and use it as is. You will need to make a new plan for each specific crisis. Build this planning stage and the capabilities it requires into your overall crisis management procedure.

This is not to say that having Plan B on the shelf is useless. Far from it. Having ready-made plan components can save crucial time during a crisis, but they always have to be repackaged, reconfigured, or otherwise readjusted on the fly.

Stage 4. Execution: Take action and carry out the plan. After you've contained the problem, assessed the situation, and customized a plan, you have to fix the problem. Fixing the problem can start only after you've developed a plan.

Stage 5. Reorganize and review: Get back to normal and prepare for the next time. During the thick of the action, it's hard to believe that every crisis eventually ends, but it does. There's no guarantee, though, that you'll have a respite before the next crisis begins. You must be able to return to normal quickly and restock emergency equipment and supplies.

It's also critically important that you build into the crisis management procedure a time to gather staff together and reflect on what happened. What worked well? What didn't work at all? What can be learned about this experience to prevent future occurrences, resolve them more effectively, minimize the damage, and improve results?

EDUCATION IS KING

Experienced managers are well aware that you can't educate staff, the media, and the public in a crisis. The best you can do is communicate. In other words, if you haven't done the necessary educating before the crisis occurs, you can't count on doing it while under public scrutiny. Before each year's hurricane or tornado season, for example, you must ensure

that citizens know about services the local government provides; locations of shelters and emergency supplies; and numbers to call to report storms, reach emergency services, or obtain other services.

Some governments hold seminars or town hall meetings in an effort to educate citizens and members of the media about pre- and post-disaster procedures. These get-togethers provide an essential service to citizens and create allies in the media.

DESIGNATED SPOKESPERSON

In her article, "Crisis Communication Plan: A PR Blue Print,"¹ Sandra K. Clawson Freeo recommends that throughout a local crisis one individual should be designated as the primary spokesperson to represent the community, make official statements, and answer media questions. A backup to the designated spokesperson should also be identified to fill the position in case the primary spokesperson is unavailable.

In addition to the primary spokesperson and the backup spokesperson, individuals who can serve as technical experts or advisers should be designated. One of these people should be the local government manager, a financial expert, an engineer, a respected community leader, or anyone the manager deems necessary during the specific crisis. This will take some brainstorming by the management team because the best person might not always be apparent.

An authority or technical expert needs to always be on hand to supplement the knowledge of the spokesperson, especially when the issue is restoring essential services such as water and electricity. Remember, the manager and the staff—not the media—control information and are responsible for minimizing disinformation.

Sandra Freeo also recommends that the spokesperson, the backup spokesperson, and the crisis communication expert should be comfortable in front of a television camera and with reporters. The spokesperson should be skilled at handling media, directing

responses to other topics, identifying key points; and speaking without jargon; respectful of the role of the reporter; knowledgeable about the organization and the crisis at hand; able to establish credibility with the media; able to project confidence to the audience; suitable in regard to diction and appearance; sincere, straightforward, and believable; accessible to the media and to internal communications personnel who will facilitate media interviews; and able to remain calm in stressful situations.

In addition to the designated spokesperson and backup, other spokespersons will represent other public entities (adjoining local governments, for example) involved in the crisis. Learn the identities of those individuals as early as possible so that all statements and contacts with the media can be coordinated among the various localities. This helps to avoid the dissemination of conflicting information or disinformation.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

You must be able to control your own agenda and not permit outside influences to dictate priorities and allocation of services. By doing so, you will maintain your credibility. Remember, most citizens and members of the media respect government's need for caution and discretion in not only what information should be released but also when it should be released. What neither will tolerate is unwarranted silence or evasiveness.

HUMAN ERROR

Most rational people can appreciate that natural and human disasters are bound to occur and that human error is a part of the disaster equation. However, the public and the media tend to be less forgiving when it is demonstrated or perceived that the local government failed to react properly to a disaster. Governments suffer if they exhibit:

- Arcane bureaucratic modalities that stifle creativity or improvisation.
- Easily avoided clerical errors.
- Employees resorting to unauthor-

ized procedures deemed reckless.

- Inadequate supervision.
- Inadequate quality control.
- Misuse of confidential information.
- Inadequate or nonexistent standard operating procedures.
- Apathy.
- Indecisiveness.
- An apparent lack of command and control.
- Failure to remedy infirmities uncovered during a previous crisis or disaster.
- Lack of communication or cooperation among emergency, relief, social service, and related agencies.

WRAP-UP

Any efforts your local government has exerted in an effort to raise citizen consciousness as well as faith, trust, and confidence in government will be for naught if it is perceived that the government's own rules, regulations, policies, and procedures are the problem and not the solution.

Having in place a cogent, uniform, and easily understood crisis management plan, knowledgeable media spokespersons, and solid intergovernmental relations goes a long way toward educating and assisting the public, informing the media, and maintaining the integrity and reputation of your local government. **PM**

¹The article can be found at www.NewsPlace.org/crisis.html.

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