

We Have a Problem . . . Call the Press!

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In the words of Henry Kissinger, "There can't be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full." In this present day of biological warfare, terrorism, natural disasters, and chemical spills, local governments and their managers must be prepared for any kind of crisis. Routine schedules can wait.

Being prepared does not merely mean having a plan on which you blow off the dust when tragedy strikes, while you communicate intermittently with the individuals involved. Being prepared encompasses start-to-finish crisis communications that managers should conduct with staff, citizens, and, significantly, members of the media. As Clarence Jones, crisis manager, so aptly puts it, "What the news media report in their first stories—and how they view your coping skills—will often set the tone for the entire crisis."

A search on the Internet yields dozens of examples of corporate crisis management plans, a few local government crisis plans, and even fewer plans with well-defined communications sections. A misperception by many in local government is that local government managers will have time to work directly with the media during a crisis. They won't. Thus, the purposes of this article are to affirm the need for a crisis communications plan and a crisis spokesperson; to delineate barriers to communications; to outline goals for the communications plan, crisis team, and training; and to provide an outline for media relations.

Recognizing the Need

Communications and emergency management personnel can agree that there is a need to improve cooperation in communications to reduce loss of life, damage to property, and damage to the environment caused by disasters. The mass media has a critical role in providing public information services to communities during crises. Communications and emergency personnel acknowledge the media's educational and opinion-forming role in more direct relations with citizens in crises and overtime. The media can help in getting the word out and keeping it updated. It is local government's job to make sure the media do it right.

The local government manager is a key decisionmaker during crises, and his or her input is essential in formulating the communications plan before a crisis strikes. But due to the wide scope of responsibility of the manager, it is recommended that the manager select another individual to be the crisis spokesperson. Smaller local government offices may elect an assistant manager or specialist in the field of the crisis, while larger local governments may use their public information officers.

Barriers

There are some limitations to crisis communications that must immediately be considered, including barriers that impede the flow of information, the availability and locations of communications equipment that is suitable for crisis use, regulatory barriers, and high costs.

With some forethought, a local government official can find ways to overcome these barriers. The flow of information may be impeded by vague or abstruse (sometimes bureaucratic or overspecialized) language used in the crisis plan. The communications section of a plan must be clear and brief. In other words, assume that no one will read it until the crisis! Crisis communi-

The Ten Commandments of News Media Relations

1. Be open and cooperative. Never lie.
2. Personalize the organization.
3. Develop media contacts.
4. Take good stories to the media.
5. Respond quickly.
6. Never say, "No comment."
7. It's okay to say, "I don't know" (but I'll find out).
8. If you screw up, confess and repent.
9. Use the big dump.
10. Prepare, prepare, prepare.

Source: 1999 edition of Winning with the News Media by Clarence Jones, available from Video Consultants, Inc., 5220 S. Russell Street #40, Tampa, Florida 33611-4055. Book order information is available at the Web site, <http://www.winningnewsmedia.com>.

cations plans also should be reviewed regularly and should at least include an effective framework of cooperation that encompasses regional governmental entities, commercial sector organizations, and the media.

This cooperation framework should identify the available resources and establish their roles; in this way, members of the media will benefit because they will know where to go to get needed information. To jump the barriers to effective communication, you also will need a system for the successful management of resources like databases and communications equipment.

To remove regulatory barriers and to expedite the dissemination of resources and equipment, consider evaluating your existing clearance procedures and methods of release of information. Are there crisis press-release templates ready for easy fill-in and release? Do you have alternate people appointed who can communicate in the absence of others? Communications planning is extremely important and affects the first hours of response in a crisis. Indeed, in crisis management scenarios, the outcome usually depends upon these first hours.

Goals of Crisis Communications

No one has time to read a long crisis communications plan. Instead, the goal is to create a plan that can be broken down into sections to make key elements easier to find. The plan should also be universal, that is, written in a way that most people can understand. This plan will be distributed to emergency team members and public information officers—the individuals the manager appoints to respond—and should be available at the emergency operations center. Consider placing the plan in three-ring binders with tabs. In the end, you want an accessible plan that will prepare the crisis team ahead of time—yet whose binding may remain uncracked and may itself survive the crisis.

An effective crisis communications plan should meet four objectives. The plan should (1) define response strategies, (2) assign crisis communications resources and responsibilities, (3) enable local government to reach target audiences, and (4) allow the appointed crisis responders to launch public information campaigns immediately during a crisis. As one of the world's busiest entertainment facilities, the SkyDome in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, accommodates traffic of 4 million people a year on a site where an accident could happen at any time. Its crisis plan is hierarchical in structure, details reporting protocols to manage the flow of information, and provides standby materials to issue to the media once a crisis has been identified.

Here are steps to consider when developing a plan (for more information, visit www.mclomedia.com, and look under Lecture 5):

1. The need for and benefits of a plan.
2. The types of crises that your organization may face. Categorize under broad headings.
3. The crisis management team, with a hierarchy. Appoint only *one* spokesperson! This is the only way

After the Crisis

your message can be accurate and consistent.

4. Short-circuit protocols that will allow quick decision-making approvals.
5. Responsibilities coordinated with other departments and agencies and outside organizations that could help.
6. The principles that apply when communicating with the media.
7. Target audiences, desired channels of communication, and updates of the current media list.
8. A system to test the plan.

Crisis planning—more specifically, communications planning—is a fundamental key to successful crisis management. Cheryl Walker of the International Association of Business Communicators talks of the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, bombing: “Early in disaster relief efforts, communication became an issue. The first hurdle was determining what personnel and supplies were needed, where, and when. Another big challenge for us came in keeping open and effective communication with those groups who were trying to serve. In addition, an early problem for us was determining who belonged in the convention center and who did not. For these reasons, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of having two-way radios, cellular phones, and security personnel available.”

Nikki Thornton, also of Oklahoma City, speaks along these same lines about the bombing and ongoing communications: “I don’t think I’ve ever responded to so many media people at once. Especially during the course of the first day, we would have numerous reporters on-site and calls holding, all seeking information we would release.”

A Crisis Team

A locality’s plan and its crisis team should fit together like a two-piece puzzle. Forming a team to communicate skillfully and respond in a crisis is one of the most important things a manager can do to ensure the staff’s professional reputation and, more important, to en-

Kate Maine, public relations officer of Hall County, Georgia, gives this advice on the period after an emergency:

1. Media inquiries may continue for weeks. Be ready for this to happen.
2. Be prepared for other issues to arise (for example, a need for enhanced warning systems).
3. Survivors usually have some needs that will initially go unmet. You will be called upon to explain why your agency may not be able to fill every request.
4. Take every opportunity to tell the story of how your agency has responded to the emergency.
5. Recognize internal and external contributions to the crisis.
6. Evaluate your communications role in the crisis; make plans for the next time.

sure successful crisis management and communications. According to Agnes Huff of Fraser/Young, Inc., the right crisis team members will ensure that your responses instill public confidence and promote safety, rather than cause irreparable damage; it’s best to choose these team members now.

To begin, establish a hierarchy, or chain of command. The first step is to identify the decisionmakers. Brown University’s library has a plan that designates a recovery director/coordinator who is responsible for all aspects of recovery activities and who coordinates with other members of the team to oversee the full details of the scenario. The director, in this case, also serves as spokesperson. Small local governments could consider this system.

It cannot be emphasized enough that there should be only one spokesperson. People in general like to step up to the mike and say a few words. To keep a message clear, though, make it clear who should be speaking and representing the locality; by designating decisionmakers

and a spokesperson, you can eliminate potential problems of authority. Usually, there are multiple decisionmakers who need to coordinate closely on a regular basis to manage a crisis properly.

The public information officer or appropriate responder, who is typically appointed by the manager as crisis spokesperson, must work closely with the rest of the team. Clear and correct communication comes from relying heavily on the support of team members, with each member providing detailed information from his or her field of specialization.

Training

Know that crisis plans can’t replace trained people. A 1992 University of Kansas survey found that only one in three organizations *with* communications plans had practiced crisis training during the previous two years. A good plan should encompass at least as much time spent on training staff to develop messages as it does on delivering them.

Three adventure councils formed by the citizens of Colorado collaborate each year to hold a mock disaster exercise, with specialized training provided before commencement of the exercise. The 1997 exercise took place at the abandoned Denver airport, where a hostage and bombing scenario “occurred.” The incident was devised by members of Denver’s law enforcement, fire response, emergency management, and communications organizations, as well as EMS/rescue teams, safety committees, and others.

The crisis was designed to have multiple events going on at one time to simulate the chaos and confused activity that can occur during a real emergency. What was missing in this exercise—the media’s involvement—is being reviewed for the 1999 mock disaster. Carrigan Bennett of the planning committee states, “We are very interested in the question about the effect of the media on a large-scale disaster situation. This year, our aim is to incorpo-

rate the media presence and enact a press conference.”

The Wilson Group, a crisis consulting firm in Columbus, Ohio, maintains that effective mock disasters are never easy. They can take as long as six months to plan, and making changes in your existing communications plan can take longer. In one corporate-based mock disaster, more than 100 recommendations for improvement led to an overhaul of the plan and a revamping of the company's security system. Despite the effort that can be spent on training and mock disasters, these may be the only ways, short of real crises, to test staff members' capabilities and to show how effectively they communicate under pressure.

Outline of Media Relations

The plan, the team, and the training have been secured. In time, the crisis hits. One of the most important rules to remember is never to underestimate the emergency—or the media will find a lot more to talk about than they already have. It is the responsibility of the local government manager to notify the staff that an emergency is being declared, and, depending on how the plan is set up, it is the public information officer's responsibility to notify the media and to activate the emergency operations center.

There should be two distinct places set aside for crisis management operations. The first, the emergency operations center or “war room,” should serve as a place for local government decision-makers to meet out of the eye of the media. The adage “Never let them see you sweat” is a good one to follow here. The operations center also should serve as a base for internal communications and for the dispensing of food and beverages to keep staff going. Second, a communications center should attend to external communications and is equally necessary. The crisis spokesperson will work from here, and it will be the location where media will report in with questions and more questions.

ICMA Resources

ICMA's textbook *Emergency Management: Principles and Practice for Local Government* (item number 40471) covers emergency mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery; the roles of the state and federal governments; organizing for emergency management; coordinating community resources; and public sector liability.

Emergency Management: Principles and Practice for Local Government self-study course (40582) provides local government staff with the information to prepare for, mitigate, and recover from emergencies. The course includes study guide and textbook.

Emergency Management: Principles and Practice for Local Government group course (40583) provides the knowledge to build an emergency management program. Course components include course guide, study guide, textbook, and two videotapes with four case studies.

A new publication from ICMA is the *IQ Service Report* titled “Developing an Emergency Operations Center” (42350). Written for any locality considering developing its own emergency operations center, the report identifies critical steps and considerations, offers sample floor plans, and lists resources.

The *MIS Report* “Planning for Disaster Recovery” (40834) provides case studies of the disaster recovery process and discusses problems, resources, solutions, and opportunities for mitigation of future disasters.

The 1996 ICMA University training workbook *Media Relations for Local Government: Communicating for Results* (42093) teaches how the news media operate, what makes a news story, what to say (and not say) during an interview, and what to include in a media policy and in staff training. It also tells how to work with the media during an emergency and ways to get the word out on achievements and successes. A textbook, workbook, suggested activities, and discussion guide are in one book for self-study, group training, or reference.

ICMA *Clearinghouse Report* (40562) “Media Relations Manual” is from Claremont, California's manual that outlines a comprehensive policy governing dissemination of official city information.

To order any of these resources, call ICMA's distribution center at 1-800/745-8780 toll-free, or visit ICMA's *Bookstore & More* on the Internet at <http://bookstore.icma.org> for convenient search capability, regular sales and special offers, and secure online credit card ordering.

Role of the Media

“Sensitivity to the media during a crisis still is a developing concept in local government and one we have addressed at several conferences,” comments Dick Lillquist, founding member of the City/County Communications and Marketing Association (3CMA). “The community wants to be represented, and the media feel it is their

job and their right to represent the community—especially in times of crisis. Historically, public safety personnel would handle the crisis, and the yellow tape would go up. Today, with the scope of crisis being redefined, it is now imperative to work with the media so that they can disseminate accurate information.” Clarence Jones's summary: Bring the media inside the crisis, and brief them often.

The media can promote pre-crisis education, disseminate warning messages, keep citizens updated with new information, and produce help requests for funds, food, supplies, and volunteers.

The media are critical to any warning system and to the overall crisis plan. Some years ago, when tornadoes headed toward Barrie and Woodstock, Ontario, Canada, no warning was given over local radio and television stations because a power failure had knocked all local media off the air. Warning residents of dangers became extremely difficult. ICMA's *Emergency Management* textbook lists as the first step in educating the media about disaster the act of getting them to make their own emergency plans. In the case of Barrie and Woodstock, backup facilities or emergency power would have assisted the media in getting the warning message out to the community.

Incorporating the media into the plan will involve the initial media briefing, which should be conducted at the communications center within one hour of notification of the media. The same person should act as spokesperson throughout the entire crisis, and the following information (with honesty being essential) should be provided to the media as soon as it becomes available:

1. Date and time of the incident.

2. Description of the incident, with as much detail as possible.
3. Number of people affected.
4. Extent of any injuries and/or deaths.
5. Special security conditions at the emergency scene.
6. Date and time of the next media briefing.

With these steps in mind, consider emphasizing meaningful communication and preparedness as parts of a crisis mission statement or motto. The Boy Scouts use the slogan "Be prepared." The city of Tallahassee, Florida, employs the tag line "To enhance communication by making it easy to be informed, involved, and up-to-date on the work of local government." A clearly defined statement sets an example for the rest of local government's work with the media.

What the Media Do in a Crisis

These actions are among the steps that Barry McLoughlin Associates, a communications consultancy firm, identifies as the steps the media take in times of crisis:

1. They find out about the crisis quickly—often before you do!
2. They monitor each other.
3. They instantly turn a local event into a national issue.

Share the Cost

The towns of Des Plaines and Park Ridge, Illinois, joined together to share the cost of an emergency communications system that can target affected regions specifically. Their system is used both for common notification, such as of snow routes, and for emergency notification. It places 24 calls per minute, with a message of 30 seconds. Members of the media are notified by pager.

Resources

The City/County Communications and Marketing Association (3CMA) is a professional association of local government professionals and elected officials that focuses on creative communications and marketing techniques to strengthen community resources. Membership benefits include conferences and regional meetings, special interest groups, news bulletins, case-study information, and membership directory.

For information, contact 3CMA, P.O. Box 20278, Washington-Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C. 20041, 202/488-7100; fax, 202/488-7665.

Barry McLoughlin Associates Inc. is a media consulting and training firm with offices in Washington, D.C.; Princeton, New Jersey; and Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Barry McLoughlin, president, is author of the Communicate with Power® series of strategic communications tools. For information, see the firm's Web site at www.mclomedia.com; the e-mail address is communicate@mclomedia.com.

4. They go where they want, unless clear boundaries are set up.
5. They report what they know quickly, constantly, and endlessly.
6. They lay blame, perpetuate myths, and report rumors.
7. And they advance the news agenda into speculation, next steps, implications, and issues.

The media will want to get as close to the emergency site as possible. They should be issued identification badges to allow admittance both to the communications center and to the crisis location. Let the media get as close as is safely possible, but have security personnel on hand to deter any violations of safety restrictions. If it can be arranged, also consider designated parking, staff accompaniment to field locations, and curfews.

Although working with the media requires a lot of effort at a time when there's a shortage of resources, the media can do a lot for you. They can promote pre-crisis education, disseminate warning messages, keep citizens updated with new information, and produce help requests for funds, food, supplies, and volunteers. Emergency situations are extremely stressful for everyone. It is important to remain level-headed and to remember that patience will encourage the spirit of cooperation. The city of Tallahassee's philosophy is "Getting the story is the media's job—seeing that it is done safely and accurately is ours."

Post-Impact Role of the Media

In addition to taking part in active crisis communications, the media also are present in a post-impact role. When the communications center is taken down, the media must know where to obtain post-impact information. Their reports will shape the final image of what has happened, and local communities will receive higher levels of assistance if the media-reported image has been accurate. Perception becomes reality.

Implementing planning to combine solid communication with crisis management will take time, but this vision is one that can be translated into healthy media relations and a well-educated public. Local governments that do this planning effectively can overcome their crises. **PM**

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