

General principles that can positively affect your actions and communication in a crisis situation:

- Bring the situation under control, if possible. Always protect people first and property second. Analyze the situation to judge its newsworthiness. Don't create a crisis by jumping the gun. Many times the situation doesn't warrant media attention.
- Gather the facts - who, what, where, when, why, how, what next.
- If necessary, activate your crisis management team. Act quickly; spare no expense to distribute the information you determine the media and others should have.
- Give the media as much information as possible; they'll get the information (perhaps inaccurately) from other sources.
- Don't speculate. If you don't know the facts say so and promise to get back to the media as soon as possible. Then be sure to do so.
- Protect the integrity and reputation of the organization.
- Report your own bad news. Don't allow another source to inform the media first.
- Perform an act of goodwill during or immediately after a crisis when appropriate and possible.
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- Be prepared - Although emergencies by their very nature are unpredictable, it is possible to list and prepare for those potential negative scenarios that might occur during chapter activities. It also is possible to set up a communication system that can be activated in almost any emergency situation.
- Do the right thing - In any emergency situation it is imperative that you put the public interest ahead of the organization's interest. Your first responsibility is to the safety and well being of the people involved. Once safety has been restored, face the public and face the facts. Never try to minimize a serious problem or "smooth it over" in the hopes that no one will notice. Conversely, don't blow minor incidents out of proportion or allow others to do so.
- Communicate quickly and accurately - Positive, assertive communication focuses attention on the most important aspects of the problem and moves the entire process forward to resolution, even in a negative environment or with an antagonistic news media. Understand that media representatives have an obligation to provide reliable information to their audiences, and they will get that information whether or not you cooperate. If you won't comment on the situation, you can be sure someone else will. You maintain control by making sure you are at least one of the major sources of media information in a crisis. Give factual information, don't speculate.
- Follow up - Make amends to those affected and then do whatever is necessary to restore your organizations reputation in the community. Change internal policies or institute new ones to minimize a repeat of the crisis situation. Also, revise your crisis communication plan based on your experience.
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- Having a system in place will allow you to deal with the situation at hand, and not waste precious time trying to decide how to communicate. An effective crisis communication plan puts you in control of what may be a very volatile and confusing situation.
- Identify potential crises - Hold a brainstorming session with key members of the organization to identify those scenarios that might result in unfavorable publicity for your chapter.
- Develop policies to minimize crisis situations - Try to anticipate potential emergency situations and develop policies to avoid them. In many crisis situations you will be asked by the media what policies you have on that particular situation. You do not want to be put in the uncomfortable situation of stating that you have no policy. Create a file of information that addresses potential crisis situations and keep it up to date.
- Develop a crisis management team - Determine in advance a team to deal with crisis communication situations. Assign at least one individual to be a crisis communications team leader and have a back up. Decide which team members will gather information, notify families of victims, deal with emergency officials, and communicate with volunteers and staff. Determine a primary and secondary spokesperson to communicate with the media in crisis situations. Give these spokespeople media interview training if possible. Appoint people to monitor coverage in specific media outlets.
- Assemble and organize resources - In a crisis situation you and your crisis communication team will want to have up-to-date and accessible information. Resource information may include: current list of crisis team members and alternates with work and home telephone numbers - each team member should carry the list; updated media lists; insurance company contacts; lists of emergency services such as fire, police, hospital and ambulance; a means to communicate with volunteers and staff (fax lists or a telephone network); copies of policies for potential crisis situations.
- Develop and distribute an emergency procedures guide - This should be a short procedural outline applicable to most events and programs (or specific guides for each event or program). It spells out what volunteers and/or staff should do if an emergency occurs or if contacted by the media, and lists emergency service and crisis team numbers. In general, staff and volunteers should contact emergency services if necessary and immediately report any potential crisis situation to the designated members of the crisis team.

During the crisis, your focus is to deal with the situation, gather accurate information and communicate quickly.

- Bring the situation under control - Before you do anything else, ensure the safety and well being of everyone involved. Always protect people first and property second. Call emergency professionals if they are needed.
- Analyze the situation and gather information - Once the necessary safety and security precautions have been taken, get the facts from informed sources before responding to inquiries. Consider legal, ethical and organizational ramifications.
- Don't blow the issue out of proportion or allow others to do so. If the media contact you before you have had a chance to assess the situation and decide on a response, let them know when you expect to have more information - and honor your own deadline. Nothing is more likely to make the situation worse than an irritated reporter who has been left dangling with no information. You will need to find answers to some basic questions including: what happened? when did it happen? where did it happen? how many people are involved? where are those people now? how dangerous is the situation? what happens next?

- Notify the families of those involved - The circumstances will vary with the nature of the crisis, but the matter always should be handled with the utmost kindness, sensitivity and discretion - always in person. Members of your crisis communication team should be assigned this task. Never release the names of dead or injured to the media before informing members of their immediate families.
- Keep internal public informed - In addition to working with the media, a good crisis communication plan allows for communication with members of the organization. If the situation warrants, call a staff and/or volunteer meeting and provide appropriate information on the circumstances and the organization's position. Or, your plan may call for the use of a fax or telephone tree system. The best policy, if possible, is to release information to people in the organization before, or at least at the same time, it is released to news media.
- Communicate with the media - In general, it is good policy to release information about the situation as quickly as possible. Comments should be of a general nature until all the facts are in, but then it is far better to get the full story out as soon as possible. Return calls first to radio and television stations, then to newspapers. Reporters provide few surprises in a crisis situation.

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- They want to get the basic information easily and quickly, usually with some kind of human interest angle. Print reporters usually will need and use more information than their colleagues representing broadcast media. Newspaper reporters are interested in basic facts for today's edition and background and implication for tomorrow's edition. Broadcast journalists, on the other hand, will want less but will be in more of a hurry and will seek more updates.
- Sometimes the media will be on the scene. In other situations you will need to initiate contact. This should be done as soon as the basic facts are in hand. The initial contact should be followed with a formal statement, including any updated information and plans for investigating the incident. Media will expect: complete honest information; background material; some indication of how the organization intends to proceed; information about the impact on your staff and volunteers; regular updates and after-the-crisis follow up.

Your spokesperson should be forthright in dealing with media questions. There are, however, some questions he or she simply cannot and should not answer, including:

- Money estimates of damage
- Insurance coverage
- Speculation as to the cause of the incident
- Allocation of blame
- Anything "off the record"

Your spokesperson should not respond to media questions with "no comment" because this answer can imply a lack of cooperation, an attempt to hide something or a lack of concern. There are more appropriate responses when he or she either doesn't have or is not at liberty to give certain information. Some examples might be:

- "We've just learned about the situation and are trying to get more complete information now."
- "All our efforts are directed at bringing the situation under control, so I'm not going to speculate on the cause of the incident."
- "I'm not the authority on that subject. Let me have our Mr. Jones call you right back."
- "We're preparing a statement on that now. Can I fax it to you in about two hours?"

- Keep a log of media calls and return calls as promptly as possible. A log can help you keep track of issues being raised by reporters, and give you a record of which media showed the most interest.

Good crisis management calls for open, honest communication with various target audiences.

During a crisis, however, this is most difficult to accomplish. As human beings, we usually seek ways to avoid or soften painful experiences. It is helpful to recognize some specific reasons people use to discourage open communication. These reasons are all logical, reasonable, and probably valid to some degree. Nevertheless, unless you deal with them effectively, they will become obstacles, making it extremely difficult to resolve the crisis.

- We need to assemble all the facts - We do need all the facts; that must be a priority. However, we may need to release some information initially and be honest about the fact that we still are gathering information.
- We must avoid panic - One of the best ways to avoid panic is to control the flow of information. We can establish and maintain our credibility as an information source only when we communicate openly and honestly.
- We have no spokesperson who can respond - Crisis communication planning will identify spokespersons. The head of the organization is an appropriate general spokesperson for most crises.
- There are legal issues involved - Legal issues often are involved in crises. Management must be willing to balance legal and public relations issues. The long-term health of an organization depends not only on a legal resolution of a specific issue, but also on the effective resolution of a crisis in the "court of public opinion."
- We need to protect our organization's image - Open and prompt communication is essential to protect our image with the media and the general public.
- We don't know yet how to respond to the crisis - It may in fact take some time to develop a solution to the crisis. Part of the challenge and opportunity of the crisis is to show those affected that the organization is using a reasonable, caring process to resolve the crisis. We can show this process best when we are willing to communicate openly.
- There is proprietary information involved that we cannot divulge - There may be information we cannot divulge, especially if there are consequences for a particular member of the organization. We need to weigh our decisions carefully, point by point, to determine if such a situation really exists, or whether we simply are making excuses. We need to remember that public safety must be a paramount concern.

After The Crisis

- Declare an end to the crisis - It is most important for your organization to signal an end to the crisis situation.
- Follow up - Stay in touch with the community after a crisis, especially with those directly affected. Keep the media informed of any updates in the situation, or let them know the crisis has ended. Review internal policies to try to avoid a repeat of the crisis situation.
- Perform an act of goodwill - Do this during or immediately after a crisis when appropriate and possible.
- Have a formal debriefing - Debrief members of your crisis communication team. Analyze the outcome and the media coverage - both positive and negative. Revise your crisis communication plan to reflect what you have learned.