

The Four Tips That Will Ensure You Build a Successful Crisis Plan That Management Will Use and That You Can Implement

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Recently I discussed the challenges with you of being prepared for a crisis. In addition, in this column, I want to share with you four key tips to ensure that your management will use the plan and deal with the crisis in the most effective way possible.

First, don't write lengthy narratives to describe the role of communications and how it works. Managers don't have the time or energy to read it! communication theory is the stuff that belongs in textbooks and is valuable but not in your crisis plan. Users of a crisis plan want simple, systematic instructions that clearly tell them what they must do and when, and what the responsibilities of their fellow managers will be. Be clear and concise in your writing. Make the instructions easy to follow and where possible use checklists to ensure that key points are not over looked.

Second, don't overly worry about trying to anticipate every possible crisis scenario by developing prepared templates for such things as "Tornadoes," "Floods," "Plant Explosions News Release," or "Chemical Spill Statement." If you can get them prepared in advance it is a good idea. However, when a crisis actually does occur, the specifics of the situation are sometimes so unique that one of the first things you may do is trash the template and start from scratch. However, templates can get you to thinking in advance through scenarios. I have seen it happen over and over again. It's very helpful to think through possible scenarios that your company will be faced with and what you need to do, however, in reality as I saw first hand in my 30-years of handling crises the unexpected will happen and you should always expect the unexpected. After all, when the tornado hit the nuclear weapons plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee a few years I had been assured they hadn't ever had a tornado. Well, it was their first in 100 plus years!

Third, work with your consultant or in-house staff to build the process around having a hands-on "communications chief" involved throughout the process. This may sound obvious, yet many crisis plans I have reviewed seem to be designed for implementation in the event the communications person "gets hit by a missile." This may be the reason the plans are so cumbersome and awkward. Simply, don't try to make every plan user a communications expert. At the outset build into your process the need to have a seasoned communications professional involved around the clock if

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necessary, and have back-up systems so that if the primary communications person is not available their backup is on hand. Also, remember some crisis can last for days – be prepared to rotate communications people through the position in such a case.

Fourth, concentrate on creating a process for communications that begins at the outset of the crisis and repeats itself for the duration of the event, even if the crisis takes days or weeks to resolve. The plan should spell out how and where the team will be brought together, how they will communicate with each other, gather information, process it and approve it, and how the communications team will get the messages out to the media and key publics internally and externally. From there the schedule should be set according to the priority level of the situation.

Although these tips are just the surface of a very deep subject each one points to the need to make sure you are not trying to impress senior management with your crisis plan document, rather you are impressing them with how well you implement the plan during a crisis and keeping them on track to a resolution.

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