

Don't Let a Good Crisis Waste You

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HOW TO DEVELOP AND LEAD A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN THAT CAN SAVE A COMPANY

“Don't let a good crisis go to waste,” a phrase that was artfully coined by Rahm Emanuel while he was the White House chief of staff, has become an interesting point of discussion among crisis communications experts and enthusiasts. Is there such thing as a “good crisis?” Emanuel might agree that a crisis can be used to provide opportunities in the political boxing ring. However, to the average government and business leader, a better way to look at the issue of crisis management is to approach the topic from the standpoint of: “Don't let a good crisis waste you!” It is a law of nature that each and every one of us experiences a crisis in at least three ways:

- » We are just coming out of some type of crisis.
- » We are currently experiencing a crisis.
- » We are heading into a crisis.

How we respond to the hills, valleys, and canyons of our lives can greatly grow us as leaders, parents, and spouses. In some instances, Emanuel's point that a crisis can prove useful in some ways is valid... if the crisis is handled properly. When all is said and done, the practitioner of a good crisis communications plan will – nine times out of 10 – come out of a crisis situation with less dirt on their armor.

According to Dr. Steve Aduato, the definition of crisis communications is “a strategy or plan that helps you respond to an out-of-the-norm problem, event or situation that cannot be handled through standard operating procedures, smart



management and commonsense leadership.” In his book “What Were They Thinking?,” Aduato goes on to point out that crisis communication is also “a strategic method of response that allows you to reach out to key stakeholders (customers), clients, sponsors, stockholders, and the general public – and inform, reassure, and ultimately cement their loyalty and support, or at least get the benefit of the doubt.”

With those two insightful definitions, one can see that a crisis, whether at work or at home, can be better handled if the leader is prepared ahead of time with a clearly developed plan of action that can be initiated on a moment's notice. Furthermore, a crisis can serve as an opportunity for a person or organization to actually come out better in the long run.

Abudato further suggests, “A crisis can happen to anyone at any time. This includes the guilty, the innocent, victims, villains, individuals, and organizations.” This observation tells us that we as leaders must “pay it forward” by examining a whole

realm of potential minefields that we could step on both personally or professionally. This is an easy suggestion to make and a difficult one to plan for because many times people and organizations get blindsided by situations and events.

For example, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill crisis of 2010 resulted from an incident that was even more severe than any organization could have possibly expected or adequately planned for. The same thing can be said for 9/11. Who could have ever imagined that such an event could have happened in this country? Although the responses from BP and the Bush administration to these two events were, in this author's opinion, both excellent, it illustrates the point that not all crisis scenarios can be planned out to the letter.

One of the most innovative forms of posturing that a leader can do to manage a crisis is the theme of a book by Michael Useem called "The Leadership Moment." Useem stresses that leaders should be in constant study of the triumphs and tragedies, mistakes and accolades that other leaders have made during their time of crisis.

He writes: "It is my view that one of the most effective ways of preparing for challenges (critical moments) is by looking at what others have done when their leadership was on the line. By examining their experience and asking what they did and what they could have done, and by wondering what you would have done yourself, you can better anticipate what you should do when faced with your own leadership challenges."

No incident bears to mind the importance of critiquing leaders in their moments on the hot seat than that of the Carnival Splendor cruise ship fire.

As a professional fire chief and crisis communications expert, I followed the response of the Carnival company, particularly the actions of its CEO, Gerry Cahill, with great interest. Many agree that Cahill and his team did an outstanding job controlling the crisis by setting up a command post... not in the plushness of a corporate atrium, but on the dock of the very port from which the ship sailed. Cahill's timely news conferences with the world's press hearing updates straight from the mouth of the company's top man were a good example of sending a clear message in a time of trial.

From what we've discussed so far, having a crisis communications plan that is established, documented, and

trained-on is critical for today's leaders. The elements of the plan should first come from five assumptions that famed American corporate CEO Jack Welch wrote about in his book "Winning."

As the former leader of General Electric Co., Welch was familiar with the handling of scandals and bad press in his long and distinguished career.

He cited that every leader of a crisis scenario should first grasp five assumptions that will better prepare them for the long haul of the scandal and its fallout.

- 1. The problem is worse than it appears** – This allows the leader to outrun the totality of the predicament and formulate worst-case scenarios that spur creative thought towards ending the crisis sooner.
- 2. There are no secrets in the world, and everyone will eventually find out everything** – Heed this advice and get everything out in the open from the beginning.
- 3. You and your organization's handling of the crisis will be portrayed in the worst possible light** – The immediate media and public opinion onslaught can and will sway emotions toward your organization that won't be favorable. All eyes will be on your organization and how well you handle the crisis in its entirety. Don't dig your hole deeper than it has to be.
- 4. There will be changes in processes and people; almost no crisis ends without blood on the floor** – Take heart. These types of changes in processes and people have been the salvation for some companies and their long-term growth strategies.
- 5. The organization will survive, ultimately stronger for what happened** – The maturity and experience gained from the ordeal of a crisis can be very valuable for future planning and response to other incidents. Try to focus on what the experience is going to give you instead of what it is going to take away.

When trying to differentiate between crisis management, crisis leadership, and crisis communications, it is amazing to discover how they are actually one and the same when the crisis actually occurs. It is my opinion that the leadership and management provided in a crisis is solidified through the communications process.

When most people, families, or organizations experience a potentially damaging crisis, they are immediately focused on correcting the problem and preventing further damage to themselves. However, there are others in the picture with a presumed vested interest, namely victims, attorneys, and the media. How we deal with each of the three aforementioned parties can make or break an organization throughout the civil, legal, and public-perception arenas.

Having a crisis response plan and team to implement it is very important, but choosing to abandon a well-conceived plan and wing it in the heat of battle will cost you every time.


Brad Phillips, CEO of Throughline Group, a media and presentation training firm, gives us “7 Rules to Remember When A Crisis Strikes.” He recommends printing this list and scanning it when the heat is on and the crisis becomes public.

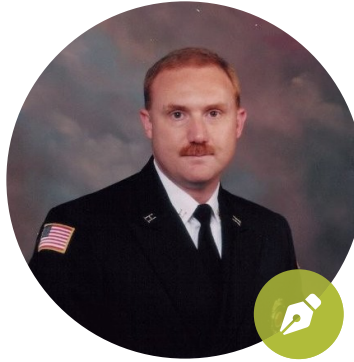
- » **You will suffer in the short-term** – Like Welch’s account of the immediate effect the crisis will have on you or your organization, Phillips believes that a well-handled crisis can enhance an organization’s reputation, increase its stakeholder loyalty, and add to its bottom line.
- » **You need to communicate immediately** – It is important to get out in front and do your own talking instead of letting someone else give the media false information based on half-truths from people who do not know the insides of the issue. Inform interested parties that, if nothing else, you are aware of the situation and are looking into it and will share information as soon as it is available.
- » **If you don’t talk, others will** – Reporters need information based on broadcast deadlines, and they’ll take the information from whoever is talking. If they don’t get it from you, they’ll get it from somewhere or someone else.
- » **Saying “no comment” is the same as saying “we’re guilty”** – Many leaders have the tendency to withhold comments until they have more information. Lawyers are notorious for advising their clients to keep tight-lipped out of fear that someone will say something that could incriminate them down the road. It might be an understandable strategy, but the public can perceive “no comment” as a sign that the company is out of touch with the situation or is a proxy admission to guilt.

- » **Your response needs to be about the victims** – When BP CEO Tony Hayward told reporters, “I’d like my life back,” the media and dissenters had a field day in painting the oil spill incident as a class warfare fiasco. Cable news images of the CEO on a sailing yacht were followed by birds swimming in oil and shrimp boat captains in tears only poured gasoline on an already volatile situation. Crisis leaders should always focus their public comments on the victims and not give the media the stick in which to beat them.
- » **Facts are not enough** – Facts can get obscured by perceptions. The crisis leader should, above delivering accurate and timely truths about the incident, strive to make sure that the stakeholders of the organization have their concerns addressed in a broader range than just that of facts and figures.
- » **Get it all out** – The media are experts on digging deeper into a story and finding sources to fill in the blanks of the information presented to them. Don’t feed crumbs to the stakeholders and media! It is tempting to bury the bad parts of the story. When suspicions start to arise that all of the information is not being presented, people will start to fill in the void areas with rumors, gossip, and unverified information.

Leadership is tough enough when times are good. When – not if – a crisis occurs, the leader’s response can determine many short and long-term outcomes and can actually shape the future of the company, church or even family.

By becoming a student of crisis communications, the leader can better prepare by observing the mistakes and accomplishments of others who have found themselves in the arena of a scandal or disaster.

Your leadership moment could come in the wake of a crisis, and your preparation and the ability to calmly manage the situation can determine that your moment is cast in a positive light. 



About the Author

Tommy E. Jones is the safety director at McCoy Grading, Inc. in Greenville, Georgia. As the fire chief emeritus for Griffin Fire-Rescue in Griffin, Georgia, for over 32 years, Jones is a veteran of crisis situations and has assisted many organizations on how to write and implement crisis plans.

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