

## It Really IS a Crisis if You're Not Prepared!

By Jodi Horton, APR

Every organization can reasonably anticipate that at some point disaster will strike. It could be a mind-blowing product tampering event such as the famous Tylenol crisis, a natural calamity like Hurricane Katrina or something as simple as losing power and product in an Arizona monsoon. Maybe a former employee is accused of shady dealing, or there's a problem at headquarters that trickles down to you.

However, whether your crisis is large or small, internal or external, local or national, planning ahead can save the day—and even turn a negative situation to your advantage.

It needn't be complicated. The key to preparing for an unexpected event is simply to acknowledge that it could happen and it could escalate and, therefore, you'd better develop some logical "what if" scenarios, each with its own rapid and solid response.

For example, you own a school bus company. One day, in a blinding dust storm, a van loaded with elementary school kids slides off the road. Your switchboard is flooded with calls from concerned families. How will you deal with these inquiries, and will your reputation be tarnished or enhanced by your handling of this unfortunate incident?

. . . or you are the manager of a company that deals routinely with volatile chemicals. Mysterious symptoms are popping up in the neighborhood and you are "invited" to meet with local homeowners to explain yourself.

It isn't a good day. But it's a "crisis" only if you don't have a plan to deal with the situation; if you must make important decisions on the fly; if your employees and contractors don't know what to do or where to go for information. Because how you respond in the first several hours of a "situation" can be the determining factor in whether the problem blows over in a few days or weeks—or becomes institutionalized in legend.

So describe your own probable causes, bearing in mind that even an unfounded allegation, poorly handled, can come back to haunt you like Dickens' *Ghost of Christmas Past*.

Then make a plan and write it down, a comprehensive checklist to be followed to the letter with no improvisation. Keep several copies in a visible place. "Clue in" every person who works at your facility, including temporary and contract workers, and outsiders who might be called in to assist with the emergency. Revisit your plan at least annually and, in between, conduct a drill or two to ensure a state of crisis readiness.

You'll want to designate a private "command center" where all the facts are sorted out as they become known, and where appropriate messages are crafted. Public statements should be written and marked clearly with the date and time, so every audience hears exactly the same thing (and so each message is documented for examination at a later date).

Choose a spokesperson. In almost every case, there should be only one. Your senior site manager might be the logical choice, but the CEO will probably prefer to direct the action in the command center and delegate the public information role to a trained employee or outside counselor.

If the emergency involves physical injury, you will want to deal first with those who could be hurt and their significant others. Maintain an up-to-date list of people you will need: emergency personnel, key employees, attorneys and media contacts who can help you get the truth before the public in a hurry. Rumors spread like smallpox — and the faster you disseminate solid information on the problem and the



fix, the faster you limit the influx of calls and bystanders waiting to learn if they've somehow been affected or a loved one is in jeopardy,

Even if the facts aren't in your favor, never lie. Say that again. Yes—**NEVER** lie. If you find that you have inadvertently misspoken, get right back to that individual and correct your error. Losing trust can only make matters worse.

Still baffled? Professional help is available. Many public relations practitioners have expertise and experience in crisis planning and assisting in times of trouble. But I promise that you can make a good start on your own because nobody knows your business like you do. As the responsible party, you'll sleep better knowing that the unexpected IS expected and a plan is in place.

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