

SUMMARY

I'm indebted to the tutor on a course I attended many years ago, a certain Michael Bland, for much of this work. He was, probably, the most inspiring man I ever met. He had Parkinson's disease but this didn't stop him being a kick boxer to a very high level. His course was one of the most interesting and enjoyable courses I'd ever been on.

The course provided a series of checklists which are invaluable in the Crisis Management process. I've taken these, over the years and moulded to what has met my needs. Whilst the course was taken a few years ago, the principles of Crisis Management still apply.

This document provides an overview for discussion and presentation to the principles of protecting your reputation in a crisis. This includes preparation of statements and identifying the key risks to your business, what to say (and what not to say) when faced with the media.

Where to locate and what to have in your crisis room and how to handle the crisis , from the immediate impacts to looking longer term and how you will be perceived during and after the incident has gone.

There are many organisations which, if they had followed the principles laid out in this paper, would have, no doubt, fared better than they did.

Crisis Management Preparation

The process here is to identify what crises can hit us and what we can do in advance to make the process less impactful and smoother both internally and externally for the company.

What Could Affect Us?

This is a quick risk assessment of the likely threats to our business. This could be environmental (flooding, fire, terrorism, or more specific – i.e. a neighbouring business which uses high explosive materials. This is useful to highlight any obvious risks, but you need to keep your mind open to the “black swans” which come from nowhere and you can’t predict, but putting a flexible response in will help you activate your plans quicker and reduce the reputational impact on the company.

Who Would We Need To Communicate With?

Identify the key stakeholders. It may be local/national press, shareholders, government, MPs, regulators, employees, pensioners, customers/clients, competitors, TV, newspapers, 999 services.

Also think about how you need to communicate. What is their preferred method of receiving information? Some may want letter, email, phone calls, text, twitter etc. It may be different for each stakeholder group.

It’s important to build the bridges now - before you have an incident. If you have an ongoing relationship with local press, you can use that to your advantage in a crisis and (hopefully) get a more sympathetic message.

Remember that the support services have their own PR teams, who are often very professional - and may also have a vested interest in deflecting unfavourable publicity.

What Would We Say?

It’s important that messages are consistent and convey the same key messages. However, they may not have to use the same words. Customers and shareholders may require different nuances but the message must be the same as any contradictions will be quickly exploited by media.

Who Will Say It?

Identify who needs to say what. It may be the same individual, it may not. The CEO may be the “face” of the organization, but he needs to be trained to give the right message. Just because he is the man in charge, doesn’t mean that he knows what to say. There are many examples of execs getting the message totally wrong. A good, trained, second in command is useful to deflect the messages, and, if it goes wrong, allows the CEO to step in if required.

What Training Do We Need?

Formal media training is essential for any business. Putting an untrained person in front of TV cameras and press is asking for trouble.

Get your people trained and prepared for questions which may come your way.

Make sure you instruct staff not to talk to press and redirect them to your press office/spokesman. Keep the message consistent. And ask them to keep off social media.

Don't give any details - not even your name. Don't be drawn into conversation.

Assure the journalist that you will pass the enquiry on at once to an informed spokesperson who will call them back straight away.

What Resources Do We Need?

Get outside experts in to help you with this. They can guide you on best practice, learn from previous experience.

You can insure for crisis support, these are people who will help you draft your messages in advance; provide an appropriate location for the press conferences; you don't want to be interviewed, providing a first class statement about how your business is resilient when you're stood in front of it on fire.

What to say

It's essential to make sure your message gets out there with the greatest impact without making the situation worse. Perception is very important.

Details

Give as much information as you can, and you know.

But don't speculate. If you don't know, it's OK to say you don't know, no matter how much pressure you're under. But say something like "We are still establishing the full facts, and wouldn't want to speculate. We will let you know as soon as possible". But make sure you do.

Depending in the situation you may be able to say that you can't comment if there's a police investigation going on. This buys you time as you are not allowed to say anything which may compromise the investigation.

Apologise

If it's appropriate, (and it usually is), apologise. To customers who aren't getting their product, to affected people, families – all those stakeholders you identified above.

Be human. You may be a faceless organisation but showing you care takes a lot of heat out of the situation. Almost always, media people will ask what you have to say to the affected people. Apologise, now.

What we are doing.

This comes in 3 parts:

1. What we have done so far
2. What we are going to do
3. What you want customers/press etc. to do. - This is useful to deflect people to where you want them to contact you. Re-direct customers from ringing your contact centre and direct them to the web site (but make sure it's got the capacity to cope with the traffic – don't make it worse for yourself).

Reassure

If you can, reassure that there will be no further damage, what was happened is not harmful to the general public, what to do if you are worried etc

Use Previous Track Record

Assuming you haven't had previous experiences of these issues, stress what a good record your company has "first accident in 20 years etc."

Emphasise the good work your company does in the community

Give Them Information

Background briefs of the company; Company history, details of products, processes, chemicals etc.

Wherever possible give details and practical examples. If you simply say 'Our safety standards are among the highest in the industry' it lacks credibility. But if you describe how often the HSE team examines the plant in minute detail; how much you invest in safety; how many people; some examples of what they do to ensure safety - then people will start to believe you.

Produce them in such a way that a busy journalist can quickly assimilate the important information (e.g. one page bullet-point summaries).

Is it feasible to produce high quality photographs and artwork (perhaps on CD-ROM) of such things as facilities, processes, people etc.? In other words, can you provide something to help fill their pages graphically with your own material?

Make sure anything you tell them is consistent with the message you want to get over and that there's nothing on your (or other) web sites which may contradict.

You may know what a great company you are. But don't take it that everyone else knows – Tell Them.

Your Crisis Room

Running a crisis is very stressful and exhausting. If you have identified a suitable place to hold your crisis (off site) it can make things easier. Some big companies have dedicated crisis centres with every conceivable resource. For most companies this is an unrealistic investment but you should at least establish something. The more you have in place the easier it is to get on with managing the crisis without constant distractions.

Venue

Chose a suitable place away from your normal place of work, but easily accessible. Nearby hotels can be useful. They often have conference facilities and if you already have a relationship (corporate account etc.) it may be available at very reasonable cost.

Controlled Entry

The beauty of hosting away from your work is that you don't have unscrupulous reporters crawling all over your site where they are not wanted, talking to your staff. Invite them to the alternative venue and give them the information in a controlled manner

The Crisis Room

There are numerous things you may want here:

- Adequate room and furniture for the crisis team and others
- Your crisis management plan and pre-prepared press releases.
- Whiteboard/flip charts (and pens that work)
- A number of telephones, including at least one with an ex-directory outgoing line
- Hotline/helpline facility
- Mobile phones and chargers
- E-communications - e-mail, web site, Internet
- TV and radio monitoring equipment
- TV/radio 'studio' facilities - to rehearse interviews
- Videoconferencing
- Stationery
- Access to mass mailing
- A means of logging all actions
- Services (press/broadcast monitoring: printing, distribution etc.)
- If feasible, a means of recording telephone conversations
- Refreshments
- Nearby or on-site sleeping facilities
- A separate and nearby venue for hosting the press

The Backup Team

Adrenaline can keep you going for a long time, but eventually you need to rest. If you and your team are tired and stressed, you will make wrong decisions and undo all the good work you have put in place. So – hand over to a backup team to keep the actions progressed and keep moving forwards, then go home (or to a hotel) and sleep.

Handling the Crisis – Immediate actions

The Holding Statement

This is a key statement when you have to tell someone something and you don't know much.

It is the nature of incidents that you don't have perfect information; it may be not available, nor true (speculation), hearsay or any combination.

The same principles apply here.

Tell them:

1. what you know (don't speculate),
2. what you've done so far,
3. what you want them to do,
4. Apologise if necessary, show concern for any victims
5. Stress that you are cooperating fully with any authorities.
6. Say that it's too early to speculate at the moment and when you'll give them more information.

Holding Actions

Sometimes it's necessary to put holding actions in place, possibly with the 999 services (i.e. put a cordon around your building to prevent people being affected). Always take police advice on this, they are the experts and will have done similar actions numerous times. The holding action may be to shut down productivity until investigations are complete.

Get the Team Together

Assemble your crisis team (on conference call or in person).

Identify what has happened:

Get the facts and confirm the details

Confirm the impact and scale

Identify Command Centre and Meeting Times

Allocate someone to keep a log of events and decisions made

And/or set up conference call.

Set up Communication Plan:

Other business areas

Executive Management Team (Is it appropriate to invoke Senior Plans?)

Other stake holders (regulators etc.)

Customer communications team (holding statements etc.)

Your Team & Your Manager

Agree who you will call, frequency you will update them and how.

Tell everyone the same message

Remind colleagues not to talk to anyone outside the business.

Regulator contact should be via Exec

Identify - What is URGENT? What are the priorities?

Immediately, Longer Term, Not at All

What other Risks and Issues are there to consider

Assess Impact on Colleagues

Health & Safety

Comfort (Food and Drink)

Information – How can we contact them?

Support Services

Our responsibilities to colleagues

Consider travel and school situations

Look at your Business Continuity Solution

Maintain Information Security Controls

Look at Colleague Rota & Planning

Record all events

Set up Manual / Alternative Procedures

Maintain communications

Handling the Crisis – Longer Term Strategy

When handling a crisis it is sometimes worth senior managers managing the main response (What's sometimes known as the Silver Team). Whereas the exec (except the only on the main Incident Management Team / Crisis Team), concentrate on more strategic matters.

What Is The Crisis And What Are The Implications?

What has precisely happened?

Do we all have the same understanding of the situation?

Is There A More Fundamental Problem?

- Is this the tip of the iceberg?
- Is this bad luck/one off or is there something we do as a company which causes the problem?
- Could this incident threaten the reputation of the company?
- Could this become a broader issue?

Is There More To Come?

Are these incidents the action of a disaffected employee/activist/customer/copycat?

What Is The Worst Case?

- How bad could this get? – so be ready for it..
- If the worst comes to the worst, what will we actually lose?
- How loyal are our suppliers, our customers, our shareholders - and will they stay with us in bad times?
- How long are people's memories?
- Are we panicking unnecessarily? Or is there something really big at stake here that we hadn't thought of?

What Are Our Stakeholders Likely To Think Of It?

Step outside our office and consider what it looks like from the outside.

- What are the perceptions of our stakeholders?
- Local communities, staff, opportunist local politicians, the media.
- It may be an opportunity to tap into the media contacts you made earlier to get their perception.

What Are The Likely Timescales?

What do we need to do now?

- How long is there before the deadlines for the various media - daily, weekly, trade, TV, radio?
- Is our holding statement all they will have to publish or do we have a little time to develop a more detailed brief for them?
- And by when do we need to have established communication with the employees, the regulatory bodies, group headquarters, the insurers?

How long is the crisis likely to run?

- the initial burst
- follow-ups:
- litigation,
- clean-up campaign,
- dealing with pressure groups etc.?

Allies

Can we use any allies to come to our aid? Would our messages come better and more credibly

- From our trade association?
- An independent research department?
- If the local politician praised us last month for being a good member of the community, is he or she prepared to say it again now?
- The Health & Safety Executive gave us a clean bill of health recently and they owe us one - can we persuade them to put their heads above the parapet on our behalf?

Transferring The Blame

Who can we find credibly culpable?

Another party to the accident, Slack regulatory bodies, Suppliers, an extortionist, andals? This could affect your strategy. If someone else is at fault, how can the public anger be diverted their way?

This needs to be handled carefully. If you are seen to be passing the buck you could come off worse, especially if the organisations you are dropping in it are on the ball.

Transferring The Spotlight

Are there other positive stories you can use as red meat for the baying pack of press hounds? Human interest stories, for example, such as personal heroism or how your safety people ensure your products are "safe". (Richard Branson praising a pilot for a crashed plane).

Containing The Crisis

Ideally you want to minimise the impact of this and how long it drags out, to stop the crisis running out of control.

In a narrow sense: can the crisis be identified with a single plant, a subsidiary or a product? If you only refer to, say, the geographical name of the plant and give all spokespeople a title relating only to the subsidiary, you can sometimes keep the name of the parent company and/or its other products out of the picture - or at least reduce the damage.