

RULES OF THE LONG, BUMPY ROAD

TEN RULES FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT:



One: Prepare.

Any organization without a risk management assessment and response procedure in place is an organization asking for major trouble. Companies have gone out of business because they were not prepared to manage crises when they hit, and the stakeholder response to that disaster focused on the ill-prepared managers who let it happen and then punted the ball when they needed to kick the field goal instead. Key to the success of this plan is to make certain your organization does not have a “failure of imagination” to foresee all potential crises that might occur, and prepare for each with the right people in the right place at the right time.

Get a crisis communications team (*Bain and Associates, of course*) to help you develop a strategic crisis communications plan, select and train key employees for the crisis team, rehearse your team with real-life potential scenarios, and stand by to fly in for additional help when the storm clouds appear on the horizon, not when the lightning has left a smoking hole in your company or association.

Two: Take Responsibility.

Before your attorney faints at that recommendation, understand that this is not the same as accepting blame.

Litigation will or will not happen due to factors that are thoroughly out of your control, and totally in the hands of any aggrieved parties affected by your crisis. If your company name is on the crisis, it is your responsibility. The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico found four different companies blaming each other for the mess. The result was a tsunami of public fury, governmental shutdowns of all oil drilling and later, enormous liability awards that the corporate absence of responsibility to drove to new punitive heights.

Those who will judge you – your customers, constituents or your neighbors - want to know four things:

1. How am I affected?
2. What are you doing to fix it?
3. What caused it?
4. What are you doing to ensure it doesn't happen again?

Three: Respond quickly with your top leaders.

Many organizations take too long to organize their response and deliver it to their stakeholders. Delays are deadly. The public expects quick response from the highest executive, who is seen live at the crisis, and it must happen in the first 24 hours. A CEO must be able to be on site in a day –wherever the crisis occurs, because the organization's future will depend upon that

demonstration of concern and leadership. Take the corporate jet, and get your top leader on the ground in front of the cameras.

Four: Show empathy, and mean it.

Nothing is more embarrassing or ineffective than a crisis-laden CEO who reads aloud a statement of empathy for those negatively affected – and sounds like he’s reading it. Okay, we take that back: the CEO sends out his PR VP to read the statement aloud, while he hides in his top floor office.

Five: Don’t overreact.

Many companies have come out swinging with armies of lawyers when a bad story appears in a newspaper. Don’t mistake that single story for a crisis; if you deliver a thermonuclear response it could lead to one. Worse, your overreaction will give the story “legs” for another day, week or more. The public knows what the appropriate level of response is. Use opinion polling to measure your critical target audiences’ attitudes to ensure you ARE responding appropriately.

Six: Call in your friends.

Develop strong, reliable relationships with respected and independent third parties who are willing to speak on your behalf. They will be academics, thought-leaders in your field or not, and opinion-shapers in your stakeholder communities who have the greatest asset you will lack in a crisis: credibility to speak believably in your favor.

Seven: Work with the media, not against them.

Your organization needs to provide responses as quickly as possible to the four questions shown above. Reporters and editors are not your enemies, and they are not your friends. They simply have stories to tell, and they WILL tell them, whether you cooperate or not. All good reporters will go directly to those who are eager to talk about your crisis, even if you are not. Do not let the negative voices overpower your own.

Eight: Recognize that your crisis WILL go viral.

Nothing travels faster than bad news, and you can think of three recent examples before you finish reading this sentence. The question then becomes: “How do I manage a viral epidemic?” First, know what is being said. Twitter Tweets and Re-Tweets, Facebook and LinkedIn posting, the vast blogosphere and the supermarket checkout line will provide plenty of opportunities to monitor your crisis in real time. Prepare to manage the most influential originators of information or opinion about your crisis, and arrange to provide direct information to those individuals or groups. As that data flow increases, your credibility and responsibility rises, and much of the viral impact can be mitigated.

Nine: Stay prepared.

Facts: 67% of surveyed U.S. companies had a crisis in the past five years. 34% of those companies had a crisis plan in place. Having your team in place is good, but they should be refreshed at least once a year, to train for new crisis possibilities, new leadership or team members and changes in stakeholder audiences.

Ten: Imagine the Worst:

Never become complacent with your crisis preparation, or skip an opportunity to gather your team regularly to “imagine the worst”. Things change inside and outside your organization, and the worst calamities are those you have not imagined.