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DIRECTORS' TIPS

Crisis Communication

Every organization needs a crisis communications plan because no organization is immune from some type of crisis, whether a power outage, a fire, a storm, or an internal problem of consequence such as a lawsuit. Art Samansky, a public affairs consultant, recently presented an NPCC workshop on the subject and offered the following advice.

Complacency and the belief that a serious problem can't happen to "my organization" are unwise and dangerous, Samansky emphasized. If your organization can't quickly and effectively communicate with staff, clients, the community, the media, donors, regulators, and others, in the face of a crisis, you are potentially putting the organization and its services in jeopardy.

Samansky likened a crisis communication plan to insurance, noting, "Everyone has insurance if they have assets they want to protect. We don't expect to use the insurance, but we still pay the premium." A crisis communication plan should be thought of in the same light.

While a good plan takes time to build, even a basic plan is better than no plan. But, trying to build a crisis communication plan in the middle of a crisis is, at best, extraordinarily difficult. "It's got to be done before something happens," Samansky said, "And, it doesn't have to cost a great deal to develop."

For those who have a crisis communications plan in place, remember the acronym TRUE, coined by The Samansky Group: Test the plan regularly; Review the plan often with staff; Update the plan whenever a key person responsible for the plan leaves the organization; and Expand the plan for new and changing business and threat conditions.

Creating a Crisis Communication Plan

Establish a crisis response team, cutting across the organization, each person with specialized knowledge and charged with handling external and internal communication. This team must include at least one spokesperson who is media trained and who can talk to other audiences and constituencies, including regulators and funders. The team must have immediate access to key decision-makers within the organization, or be given decision-making responsibility. Time is critical in a crisis and on-the-spot decisions often must be made.

Examine your organization's vulnerabilities that may lead to a crisis. Make a list of the possibilities and prioritize them in order of probability and consequence. Start with the basics, such as lawsuits, regulatory action, and inaccessibility to your facility. If nothing else, build a plan of action to deal with these possible crises. The framework often will serve as a basic guide for crises not planned for or considered. Plan for a back-up office/facility with critical equipment and files. Be honest in assessing the possible crises.

Determining which constituencies, in the event of a crisis, you are going to get in touch with and in what order—depending upon the crisis. For example, if it's crisis #1 you need to contact staff and then clients. If it's crisis #2, you contact the board and then the media.

Commit the plan to paper; ensure that key personnel have copies at home as well as in the office. A copy on your intranet alone won't suffice: power systems fail, and computers crash. Put a copy of the plan in a red binder on the office bookshelf or a designated and clearly marked file drawer so you can find the binder quickly. If needed, translate the plan into any other language that may be necessary. Designate a specific person who will be responsible for taking the binder if the building must be evacuated. Name a back-up person to take charge in case the designated person is out of the office that day.

Build your own customized plan, as one size does not fit all—you can't just borrow another organization's plan.

Some Tips on Handling a Crisis

Be available to whomever—the media, the public, etc.—any time, day or night. If you wait until the next day to return a phone call you may lose your chance to get your side of the story out, especially with 24/7 media and tight media deadlines. Once someone else tells your story from his or her perspective, your crisis may worsen.

Tell only the truth. If you try to cover it up, sweeten it, or spin the story, someone will uncover the truth and your credibility and that of the organization will be destroyed.

Don't avoid talking to publications that you consider "extremist." All news media must be treated fairly and equally.

Get the news out as soon as you can, and, tell what you are going to do or are doing, to rectify the situation. The longer you sit on the news, the more it may appear that you're trying to bury or hide it and the more likely someone else will tell your story from his or her perspective. Timing depends upon the circumstances. If you believe the problem is about to become public (e.g., about to be announced via a lawsuit) or "rumors" are circulating, act to get the story out first. If the issue involves a potentially dangerous situation to the community, make the news known quickly and widely. Acting responsibly is essential.

Quell any rumors, concerns and fears that are circulating or likely to circulate. Facts and truth are your greatest allies.

Avoid setting unrealistic deadlines for solutions and avoid making promises that you can't keep.

Make sure your messages are consistent to all constituencies. Examine every one of your statements, and ask if they are believable.

Assume there are going to be leaks. Don't waste your time trying to find where they are from. As spokesperson, the more available you are and the more forthrightly and quickly you speak to the media and other audiences, the less influence leaks will have.

Work closely with your lawyers and understand what is driving them. But, as the spokesperson, you must make clear to the lawyers what is driving you and the media. There is always a way to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement.

Keep the crisis in perspective and don't take it personally. Don't get caught up in the concern of the moment by others: you can't give the best guidance that way.

Don't assume that your organization's "good name" is going to buy you a pass in the crisis. You must constantly re-prove your good name.

Don't bury your head in the sand, and don't stop doing business as usual. For example, don't stop running advertisements, or sending press releases about the positive work of your organization.

A well-structured crisis communications plan, carried out truthfully and quickly, will always serve the organization and its constituencies well and avoid making a crisis worse or longer-lived.

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