

Human Factors in Crisis Communication

By Norm Hartman



When a crisis is upon us our attention inevitably shifts to employee and community safety, recovery of plant and services, reputation management, financial and legal concerns. In many cases, we set aside the human factors – the suffering that people – internal and external – experience and the strain that is placed on our own crisis team.

We suggest that every crisis communication plan consider the following:

1. Assure that the team has the strongest leaders and remember that internal politics, personalities, competitive factors, jealousies and other concerns can quickly assert themselves when the pressure is on.
2. Remember that the crisis team – and other key operational teams – cannot live on pizza alone. They need time away from the crisis to regenerate, see their families, catch their breath and rest. The job of spokesperson is incredibly intense, and without rest a spokesperson may make critical mistakes.
3. Key team members may be unwilling to leave matters in the hands of others, but they need the rest and the fresh perspective a break provides. Remember that family considerations (young children, disabled or elderly dependents) can impact the attitude of a team member.
4. Be sure your team members understand how people, whether family members or colleagues, deal with loss of life or serious injury. Key people should be trained in advance and you should have arrangements with outside experts (i.e., psychiatrists) to move quickly during and after the crisis.
5. Have clear procedures for providing support for those directly affected by the crisis. This may include visits to hospitals, attending funerals, providing cash stipends, transportation housing for immediate family members.
6. Understand Federal, State and local laws as they relate to the release of personal information. During a crisis there will be intense media pressure to give names and other family information. Your first responsibility is to protect the privacy of employees, their families, customers and suppliers.

7. Use great caution in reporting a death. In some jurisdictions only the coroner or a designated law enforcement person can officially confirm a death. Families should be notified only by that official, or, if by you, only after official verification is received. Be absolutely certain the family is told before the information is released to employees, the public or the media.
8. The personal belongings of employees who have been injured or died must be returned to their families in a caring and sensitive way.
9. Keep people informed. A vacuum of information leads to rumors and speculation. Your own employees are your first and most important audience. Be certain they know important news before it is made available outside the organization.
10. The Internet is a very valuable tool for communicating your own messages. During the crisis at Virginia Tech it became a primary and immediate source of information on and off campus. Use it, and watch it. Monitor what others are saying in blogs, newsgroups, forums, chatrooms and YouTube and respond immediately when warranted.
11. Above all, show concern and compassion. Employees, neighbors, customers, suppliers, the community and the media will be watching and judging. They want to know they are associated with an organization that does care and that its people always come first.

TMT Worldwide, Inc., provides crisis communication consulting and training, including audits of organizational vulnerabilities, development of crisis plans, spokesperson training, tabletop exercises, and continuing consultation during and after crises. Contact us for additional information.