

TEN ESSENTIAL TIPS FOR HANDLING A CRISIS

"BY FAILING TO PREPARE, YOU ARE PREPARING TO FAIL." - BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

In this day and age, preparing for a potential crisis is not just smart – it's absolutely critical. Every crisis is different, but you can communicate effectively through any crisis by following a few simple guidelines. Here is a Top 10 list of tips for preparing for, and handling, any crisis your city may face.

1. BE PREPARED. HAVE A PLAN.

Your city will face a crisis. It's not a matter of if, but rather when. That's why before a crisis strikes, it's critical that your city government takes steps to ensure that it's ready. Plan for possible crises that could affect your local government – everything from a data breach to an incident involving your police department to a natural disaster. It's important that your government is ready by establishing a crisis team, identifying potential threats and issues, and creating a basic plan that your team can turn to when a crisis occurs. A well-crafted crisis management plan could head off a crisis before it develops.

How do you prepare? Here are some of the questions you must consider in creating a crisis management plan:

- Who will be on your crisis team?
- Who will direct the crisis team?
- Who will be your spokesperson(s)?
- What communications channels will you use to update constituents?
- How often will you provide updates?
- What are your key messages?
- Who must approve all statements?
- What reporters and news organizations should you contact with updates?

2. GET THE FACTS FAST. NEVER LIE!

In today's world of 24/7 news cycles, you don't have the luxury of waiting to get facts out to the public. During a crisis, the media want answers. In the absence of you providing a quick response, reporters will begin to speculate or turn to supposed "experts" who will give their views – and the public will be left trying to figure out what's really happening out there. You begin to lose control. It's the crisis team's responsibility to get the facts out as quickly as possible, without distorting the truth. Reporters want answers, and the answers need to come from you.

- Funnel information to control the message.
- Never lie. The truth will come out.
- Regularly respond with the information you have.

3. BREAK YOUR OWN BAD NEWS.

In a crisis situation, the news being generated by the event will most likely be bad merely by the nature that it is a crisis. This makes it even more essential that you remain in control of the flow of information, both good and bad. Don't wait to let a reporter break bad information and dictate how the story is told.

Consider a situation where a train derails in your city while pulling chemical tanks, and the tanks might be leaking toxic ooze into a local waterway. Your local leaders need to be out front in releasing the information and assuring the public that all steps are being taken to protect their safety. Releasing the bad news allows you to define the issue on your own terms. It also allows you to announce what steps you are taking to resolve the problem.

- Tell it all. Tell it fast. Tell the truth.
- Define the story on your own terms.
- It's easier to provide an accurate story than correct a bad one.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie did just that when he admitted his staff was involved in Bridgegate, an incident in 2013 in which parts of the George Washington Bridge were closed in what was believed to be political retribution against local officials in Fort Lee, NJ, which was impacted by the traffic jams caused by the bridge closure.

4. REMEMBER: NO COMMENT = YOU'RE GUILTY

In a crisis situation, your initial inclination (or those of your legal counsel) may be to hold off on commenting until you have more details of the situation. Don't make this error. Waiting to comment is one of the worst mistakes you could make. The media and public will quickly turn your "no comment" into a presumption of guilt. They begin to question why local leaders aren't saying anything, and inevitably assume the worst. They will wonder, "What are they hiding?" You might not have a wealth of information to report, but give reporters and the public what you do know. Assure them that you are working to learn more and will provide an update as new information becomes available.

- Stories will be published and broadcast, whether you comment or not.
- "No comment" can be costly legal advice.
- You can always say something, even if you can't provide much information.

5. COMMUNICATE WITH ALL AUDIENCES.

In today's world of fast-paced technology, people get their information through a variety of sources, including many that didn't exist as recently as 20 years ago. In addition to the traditional news outlets, there are a vast number of cable channels, online news platforms and, of course, social media. Many people get much of their information from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, just to name a few. It's important to realize that not everyone reads a newspaper or watches a TV newscast. In order to reach as many of your constituents as possible, you must utilize all platforms of media, especially social media, to convey the latest and most accurate news relating to the issue at hand.

- Respond through the most appropriate channels.
- Respond quickly to prevent inaccurate news from spreading rapidly.
- Don't forget about internal audiences – make sure your city's staff members are kept up to date.

6. KEEP THE MEDIA "FED" ... EARLY, REGULARLY, TRUTHFULLY.

When a crisis breaks, it's crucial that you provide a steady flow of information, even if you're repeating information. Remember that many of your constituents may have not heard the information the first time you provided it. It's important that city leaders are seen and heard, showing that they are out in

front of the issue and are actively involved in dealing with the crisis. Remember to stay calm, confident and compassionate.

- Provide consistent, regular updates.
- Keep the public constantly updated; it's okay to repeat previous information.
- Reflect genuine sincerity, especially during tragedies.

7. MONITOR ALL MEDIA, AND DON'T BE AFRAID TO CHALLENGE THEM WHEN THEY GET IT WRONG OR ARE UNFAIR.

No matter how prepared you might be, how clearly you are communicating to the media and how organized your response plan is, there is bound to be a reporter who just doesn't get it right. Monitor media coverage to make sure your message is being conveyed in the proper context to the public. Sometimes a reporter's error is simply the result of the demands of the job and the time crunch inherent in the crisis story. Don't be afraid to communicate with that reporter about your concerns. It's best to do this by email so you can avoid immediate follow-up questions and so you can have a record of the discussion. If the reporter declines to correct his story, get the name of a supervisor and communicate directly with that person.

- Sometimes reporters don't have the time or resources to do the research.
- If necessary, climb higher up the newsroom hierarchy.
- Even if an error isn't corrected, you can lay the foundation for an accurate follow-up story.

It's also crucial that your city include a social media strategy as part of its crisis communications plan. There is a separate article on social media strategy on this CityGuard site (see "How to Activate Social Media in a Crisis"), but be sure to follow these quick tips:

- Monitor the online conversation to keep misinformation from spreading.
- Quickly publish an initial update message to your city's social media accounts and direct people to your city's website for complete information.
- Use the "hub and spoke" model to direct the public to a central site on your city's website. Use all other channels, such as Twitter and Facebook, as "spokes" that direct people to your website – the "hub" of information.

8. TAKE REAL ACTION STEPS.

In responding to a crisis situation, emphasize what is being done to solve the problem and/or make sure it doesn't happen again. Show that your city government is not only working to resolve the current issue, but is being proactive in finding answers and preventing future incidents.

- Show you are committed to resolving the problem.
- Cooperate with authorities outside your jurisdiction.
- Implement new protocols as appropriate.

9. BRING IN THIRD-PARTY VALIDATORS.

Don't hesitate to bring in outside experts or organizations that can validate what the city government is doing to address the crisis. Make sure you take time during your crisis management planning to identify these experts and how to reach them when a crisis develops. If your crisis involves a data breach, you

might have a financial or law enforcement expert ready to assure the public that you're handling the matter properly.

- Work with experts who can evaluate the situation.
- Cultivate messengers who will support your goals.
- Show audiences that you take the crisis seriously and are taking the best steps to resolve any problems.

10. OPEN A PROACTIVE POSITIVE TRACK EVEN AS YOU DEAL WITH THE CRISIS.

Be sure to maintain a positive track during the crisis. Look for ways to show progress, protect your city's reputation and offer hope. Use social media and reach out as often as possible when you have good news to report.

- Look for positive news hooks that show progress.
- Make sure your messages are getting out to as wide an audience as possible.
- Provide hope and support through your messages.