

How to Communicate During a Crisis

The FBI is at your doorstep.

Your CEO has just been arrested for embezzlement.

One of your employees has robbed a local bank.

What do you do now?

- **Don't panic.** While crises demand a timely response, they do not require an *immediate* response. It's critical that you take some time to ensure that your initial statements are appropriate and well reasoned. Respond to media inquiries promptly—but on *your* timeline. While a "no comment" comment should *always* be your last option, a "no comment" is always better than a response that has the potential to damage your organization's reputation. Take the time you need to be appropriately prepared.
- **Gather internal stakeholders to develop a response plan and key messages.** Call a group of key players together, as appropriate given their roles within the organization. For example, if you're the senior HR professional in your organization and you've just learned that a senior manager has been charged with sexually harassing an employee, it might be appropriate for you to contact people in legal, corporate communication, and senior leadership roles to develop a strategy and communication approach. Other situations (a product recall, for example) might most appropriately be handled and led by the corporate communication or public relations departments.
- **When responding to questions from the public or the media, be sure that you are responding to *your* questions only.** Be keenly aware of what information is yours to share and what information belongs to someone else. Don't repeat someone else's information, or *you* become the spokesperson. For example, if one of your employees is charged with employee theft, you may have a copy of the police report. The police report, however, belongs to the *police department* and it should comment on the investigation, not you. Don't even reiterate the information contained in the police report. If you do, it becomes *your* statement, and you risk violating the employee's privacy or making a misstatement. Know what's yours and respond to *only* those questions that are truly within the purview of your organization.
- **Never speculate.** If you don't know for sure, say so. If you're uncertain of the appropriate response or all the details, don't venture a guess. Offer to find the answer and the appropriate spokesperson.

- **Control the message.** Information should be shared on a "need to know" basis only, even among your communication and HR staff. This gives them less opportunity to inadvertently share confidential or inaccurate information.
- **Make sure that communication and other informed staff members clearly understand the importance of their role in respecting and protecting confidential corporate information.** They may be held to a higher standard than other employees and need to be above reproach. Even when they're repeating information that they've read in the newspaper, for example, there's the potential that if the statement is coming from them they will be quoted as "the source."
- **If inaccurate or misleading information is reported by the media, don't automatically move to correct that information.** Consider carefully before responding, weighing the value of issuing a correction that could give the story a "longer life" against the potential for damage from the misleading information. Other options are available to you to communicate "your side" of the story. (See "Threat Assessment-Managing Media Demands.")
- **Tell it all.** Tell it now. Don't let stories drag on because you haven't been forthcoming with information that you thought "would never become public." When a crisis occurs, operate from the premise that the media—and the public—will ultimately find out all the details. You are best served if you share information early and completely. Some well-known examples of the implications of *not* doing this include the President Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal and the Martha Stewart insider-trading case.

Selecting the right spokesperson in a crisis is critical. Contrary to what you might think, in most cases the CEO is *not* the right spokesperson. "When choosing the correct spokesperson," says Sobel, "you have to understand the legal ramifications of that person's comments." In the most sensitive situations, he suggests, it's a good idea to consult with a legal adviser. "Do you want a CEO to allude to some specific financial or personnel or operational matter that could have liability implications down the road and have them talk about it in general when, during a court action, there would be an assumption that if they could speak about something in general, they knew things specifically?" Cases in point: Enron and WorldCom.

Sometimes, says Sobel, a spokesperson may be selected simply because of "deniability." "If there's no expectation that they know everything and a reporter asks a tough question, they can say, 'I'll have to find out about that and I'll get back to you.' Whereas," he points out, "a CEO or some other expert in the company doesn't have that pad of time and luxury because a reporter—or any audience—would expect that that person would know that information."

Whoever you select for your spokesperson, make sure that they have been properly trained and coached to respond to the media or other public audiences. Again, operate on *your* time. While you need to be responsive, you shouldn't feel pressured into a response that you are not prepared for.

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