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ISSUES ANTICIPATION/CRISIS MANAGEMENT  
FOR BEGINNING PROFESSIONALS

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In 1985, only 66% of 30 selected Fortune 500 companies had crisis communications plans ready. Today, over 90% of these organizations have them. The same is true of hospitals, schools, associations & other organizations.

Why? Because a crisis is an issue that has gotten out of hand -- and can have a ruinous effect on an organization if it isn't handled properly & promptly.

The first step, then, to a good crisis management plan is an issues anticipation program. We can't manage the issues; but can prepare to respond to them by knowing what they are in advance. Or -- better yet -- can see them coming & deal with them before they become issues.

What exactly constitutes an issue? First, it must affect a sizeable number of people to deserve the term. Second, it offers at least two opposing sides. And third, it is an emotional battle.

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## I. 5 STEPS TO ANTICIPATING ISSUES

### 1. Issues Identification:

First, ask yourself these questions:

- a. What's going on out there?
- b. Can it happen here?

Identify 5-10 issues that will predictably mature in the next 1-3 years. Determine ways you can track these issues, such as:

1. Scanning media to spot significant events and trends; but major media are not as helpful since by the time they report on a trend it is usually fairly well established. Seek out "little magazines", offbeat newsletters, specialty journals -- and talk radio!
2. Networking within the local community to determine local issues.
3. Identify opinion leaders and keep in touch with them regularly to spotlight upcoming issues.

You may want to set up issues anticipation teams to provide structure to issue-tracking.

### 2. Issues Analysis:

Categorize your issues. They will be one of these 4 types:

1. Latent: While it's logically possible the issue could emerge, nothing is really happening at this time except some innovators are starting to think about it.
2. Emerging: Not yet a "hot" issue, but appears to be on its way to becoming one (i.e. animal rights in the last half of the 1980s).

3. Hot: A current issue that is the subject of extensive public debate (i.e. nuclear power or chemical contamination in the mid-late 80s).
4. Fallout: An issue born as a result of debate over a hot issue. For example, if public safety was the initial issue in the nuclear power debate, cost may be a fallout issue.

It is best to deal with issues in the latent or emerging stages because the response & environment are easier to control. Once an issue becomes hot, some change is inevitable for the organization involved -- because in our democracy these debates can only be settled by compromise. No one ever wins 100% of their points or demands. A critical technique in crisis management, therefore, is planning in advance what trade-offs you can make or are willing to make if a compromise becomes necessary.

3. Issue Change Strategy:

Conduct issue surveys to get feedback from community, employees, customers and other publics to determine the significance of the issue -- and their perceptions of possible impact on them & on the organization.

Brainstorm to determine realistic strategy options for dealing with the issues, based on your analysis & the findings of the surveys. List long and short term goals for managing the organization's response to the issue.

Write scenarios of possible futures. These are "short stories" pretending that such & so has occurred & you have done this or that in response -- to predict how real people would act under the circumstances. They help visualize how various strategies would actually play out.

4. Issues Action Program:

Carry the selected strategies into action by implementing activities like the following:

- a. Start a speaker's bureau, or a membership network.
- b. Develop contacts with futurists, academics, authorities on the subject area, relevant political or government officials.
- c. Stimulate issue-oriented articles in news media or your own media to begin framing the discussion.
- d. Keep centrally located files on the issues so everyone is aware of what the dimensions are at any point in time -- preferably a computer database.

- e. Develop an outreach program to communicate your message persuasively to publics that may presently be on the other side of the issue. You may not convert many, but you can often neutralize them.

The list is endless -- limited only by a) your imagination & public relations skills, b) the budget & c) time available before the issue looks likely to hit.

#### 5. Issue Evaluation:

Resurvey your publics to find out if their behavior or attitudes have changed as a result of your efforts. Find out where your program needs reinforcement. Deal with new issues that may be surfacing in this stage.

## II. HANDLING THE CRISIS

Of course, an issues anticipation program isn't a guarantee that a crisis won't occur. The chart below looks at 5 causes of crisis and offers advice on how each situation may be handled.

### Cause of the Issue

### Tack your organization can take:

An issue is usually the result of one of the following occurrences:

1. Organizational Failure. Someone in the organization did something to cause the issue.

1. Acknowledge the goof, announce your organizational failure and plan to see that it won't happen again. Communicate this to the public.

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| <p>2. <u>Honest Disagreement.</u> There is an honest disagreement between two opposing sides -- or possibly the organization and the public.</p> | <p>2. Make it understood that although you feel your opponents are wrong, they do have a right to their opinion &amp; you respect them for it. This way, you take the starch out of the opposition rather than stiffening their resistance with "I'm right, you're wrong, and that's the end of it".</p> |
| <p>3. <u>Bedfellow.</u> Someone who is your ally or employee does something awful and you are guilty by association.</p>                         | <p>3. Distance yourself from the bedfellow.</p>  |
| <p>4. <u>Scandal.</u> Your organization has broken the law or the moral/ethical codes.</p>   | <p>4. Distance yourself from the scandal -- make sure the public understands the scandal is not within the organization, but rather, has been committed by an individual.</p>  |
| <p>5. <u>Accident.</u> A disaster has occurred and your organization is responsible; even if no one was at fault.</p>                            | <p>5. Express extreme sympathy for any victims first. Then, if it was a failure on your part, admit it. Show plans designed so the accident doesn't happen again.</p>  |

Generally, the philosophy that public relations professionals have been advocating all along applies here -- 1) admit your error; 2) apologize; 3) tell what you're going to do about it so it won't happen again.

### III. CRISIS OR EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Your organization should have a written plan that 1) everyone is aware of; 2) management has agreed on; and 3) is kept in an easily-accessible place by all who have responsibilities under it. The Air Force has even developed a pocket size booklet containing various crisis management plans, which those involved carry with them wherever they go.

Much has been written on emergency plans and it is not directly our topic here. But practitioners need to be aware of this essential tool so brief coverage is given for that purpose.

(If you would like copies of the original basic documents on formulating an emergency plan, written by Bob Barbour, one of the first champions of this technique, write pr reporter, Box 600, Exeter, N.H. 03833. If you need it ASAP, call 603/778-0514.)

The problem in a crisis situation is that word spreads fast and you have to be able to get & give out information quickly -- in order to minimize the danger of rumors and destructive supposing by your publics.

Equally important to information flow is the emotional effects on various people. Giving out the facts won't deal with this -- so you have to be a psychological counselor, too. The emotional or "feelings" content is more important than factual data, and communication (whether one-on-one or to large publics) must give this priority.

Some techniques that will help you communicate more smoothly and effectively during a crisis:

1. Use all relevant communication media. Work with reporters on the scene. Telephone bulletins to key media not represented.

2. Keep employees informed. Use employee bulletin boards, telephone to head office and department heads to allow the message to filter through the ranks as quickly as possible. It is essential that employees hear the news internally before learning it externally.
3. Spell out exactly -- by name, title, extension, home telephone -- the sequence of notification to be followed the moment an emergency or disaster situation occurs. If it is a chain procedure, make clear who should start the ball rolling.
4. Arrange for communication channels to be kept open. Determine how switchboard will handle onslaught of incoming queries. Have a designated press room. Keep a bull horn or P.A. system handy.
5. Write telephone scripts so everyone in the organization is communicating the same story (it is important to speak with one clear voice).
6. Make yourself available. As the public relations director, you link the organization to the outside world and will have to be there to handle 1001 situations personally. If you can't stay in one place, designate one secretary in charge of covering your phone and relaying all messages.
7. Assign a media spokesperson to the news room with the authority to answer questions fully and frankly and to make on-the-spot arrangements necessary for proper news coverage.
8. Rehearse the plan. Make sure everyone understands their duties and how to carry them out.



9. Update the plan frequently. New exposures to peril, personnel turnover and other changing conditions makes this necessary.

IV. OTHER "TO DOS":

1. Stick to the issue at hand. Don't drag in side issues or other comments that will muddle the debate, confuse your supporters or stiffen the resolve of your opponents.
2. Be able to admit when you're wrong. It shows that you are honest & human, qualities likely to win respect for you -- & thus your position.
3. Don't be afraid to alter your position. Rigidity makes it appear you don't listen or are oblivious to what others are saying, which are the traits of arrogance. Often sensible suggestions will be made that require altering your position. And -- how can you compromise or reach accommodation if you won't budge?
4. Find good things to say about the other side. This makes you seem friendly & reasonable.
5. Present your views in a non-defensive manner. If they're sound, what have you got to be defensive about? Instead, be proactive & persuasive.
6. Never ridicule.
7. Rise above the opposition. Don't just oppose but offer solutions that are win-win. Be the party with everyone's welfare in mind.