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# Crisis Management in Public School Districts

Barbara S. Gainey



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experience. Her research interests are in the areas of public relations, crisis management (particularly in educational settings), leadership, and public engagement.

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## Abstract

School districts, as public institutions serving kindergarten through high school students and their communities, can improve their crisis-ready status by strengthening crisis response strategies. Crisis management offers strategies and processes for preparing for, preventing, responding to, managing, recovering from, and learning from crisis events. Proactive steps can be taken to improve crisis readiness before, during, and after a crisis event. In the crisis-rich environment of the new decade, education systems need to continue to evaluate current crisis plans, modifying them to address emerging issues, incorporate new communication methods, and respond to diverse stakeholder groups.



Societal and technological changes swirl around us at a dizzying pace, creating new opportunities and, at the same time, exposing organizations to greater potential for crises. From the personal-turned-public crisis of golf star Tiger Woods to worldwide economic and health threats, organizations are expected to be ready to respond quickly and appropriately, whatever the challenge.

Crisis case studies abound, if only organizations pay attention. In the early days of crisis management—following the Johnson & Johnson Tylenol tampering crisis in the 1980s—we saw ample examples of organizations slow to acknowledge new vulnerabilities. In 1985, *Business Week* reported that “most companies are abysmally prepared for crisis (p. 74). In a study by Fink (1986), 89 percent of the chief executive officers of *Fortune 500* companies reported that a business crisis was almost inevitable; in spite of that recognition, fully half of CEO respondents did not have a crisis plan in place. Still, these CEOs were confident

in their ability to adapt; 97 percent felt very confident or somewhat confident that they could respond adequately to a crisis. The Exxon *Valdez* crisis in 1989 is frequently cited for its shortcomings and the lessons that can be learned (Small, 1991; Harrison & Prugh, 1989). By 1992 Pauchant and Mitroff wrote that the “reactive ‘try-and-fail’ method...is ill suited to the present situation. Considering the dangerous technologies used nowadays, industrial disasters now have global impacts...We can no longer afford to muddle through. We need to become proactive and anticipate as thoroughly as possible the lessons for the future (1992, p. 32).

In the post September 11-era, it seems foolish to ask if crisis planning is something organizations should undertake. Crisis events may:

- Affect and disrupt the entire organization.
- Negatively affect the organization’s publics, products, and services.
- Jeopardize the organization’s reputation, future profitability, and even its survival.
- Dramatically redefine an organization, affecting its business and culture.
- Violate the vision of what the organization is set up to accomplish.
- Inflict long-term damage on the organization and its relationships with its stakeholders. (Coombs, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Lerbinger, 1997; Silva & McGann, 1995; Murphy, 1996).

On the other hand, crisis management proposes strategies and processes for preparing for, preventing, responding to, managing, recovering from, and learning from crisis events. To be crisis ready, organizations should (a) evaluate the organization’s communications climate, whether the organization is open or closed to sharing information; (b) identify stakeholders crucial to the organization’s success; (c) create a written communication map or network of stakeholders that could be

relied on in a crisis (d) develop ongoing, two-way communication between the organization and these key stakeholders; (e) incorporate a mix of traditional and new media in an established communication program; (f) develop new ways of meaningfully engaging stakeholders in areas of shared interest and concern; (g) anticipate the demands that users of traditional and new media will place on the organization in times of crisis (Gainey, 2007, p. 414).

The Johnson & Johnson Tylenol crisis and the traumatic events of September 11 are often cited as wake-up calls for crisis planning in the private sector. In the public sector, we often turn to the lessons of crises such as Hurricane Katrina and the more recent concerns raised by the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic. The educational sector has had a number of alarming incidents demonstrate its vulnerability to tragedy and crisis:

- Frontier Junior High, Moses Lake, Washington, February 2, 1996: two students shot and killed two of their classmates and a teacher.
- Pearl High School, Pearl, Mississippi, October 1, 1997: a student stabbed his mother to death, then went to school and fatally shot two students.
- Heath High School, West Paducah, Kentucky, December 1, 1997: a student killed three students.
- Westside Middle School, Jonesboro, Arkansas, March 24, 1998: two students fatally shot four fellow students and a teacher.
- Thurston High School, Springfield, Oregon, May 20, 1998: a student shot his parents to death and the next day shot and killed two students (“Profiling Bad Apples,” February 2000).

However, it was the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in April 1999, nearly 11 years ago, and the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007 that spurred public school districts and

colleges and universities to make crisis planning a priority. Fortunately, dramatic incidences such as those that result in multiple deaths and injuries are a small percentage of the crises that may affect public schools and school districts, the focus of this discussion. Far more common are crises related to inclement weather, discipline issues, curriculum changes, and leadership challenges. Crisis-support material on the U.S. Department of Education's Emergency Planning Web site ranges from pandemic flu preparedness, salmonella outbreaks, beef recall information, skin infection information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, hurricane information, and crisis planning resources (Emergency, 2010).

Schools districts have in common federal legislation, state accountability measures, issues related to curriculum standards, inclement weather challenges, and budget crises at the local, state and federal levels. Because best practices in crisis response are consistent across organizations, school districts and schools can benefit from similar crisis response strategies. To be most effective, this emphasis on crisis response and crisis communication must be a priority of the superintendent, as educational CEO, and his or her leadership team, which should include a full-time public relations professional (Gainey, 2003). Leaders have a unique opportunity to mold organization culture through the transmission of values and ethics and access to formal channels of communication.

"Leadership is largely a process of communication among leader and followers. The communication serves to create effective leader-follower relationships, consensus around organization values, integration, and a shared vision concerning the organization's future." (Seeger, 1997, pp. 182-183)

"When members of the public decide to put their confidence in a school system, it is not the bricks and mortar that they have in mind. They are thinking of the individuals who are making the plans, setting processes in place, and making decisions. Public relations are relationships of a public nature. In the final analysis, the human element is the only element of significance." (Hughes & Hooper, 2000, p. 142)

In this new decade, public schools are not immune to increasing societal pressures—including global terrorism threats, health concerns, and financial stresses. These pressures threaten to distract schools from their central mission of educating students. School leaders must look for opportunities to more fully engage their communities, forge new collaborations, strengthen two-way communication with key constituencies, and demonstrate visionary leadership to maintain successful, safe, and crisis-ready school districts (Gainey, 2003). Steps can be taken before, during, and after a crisis occurs to build crisis readiness and strengthen school districts for an uncertain future.

### **Steps to take before a crisis occurs**

- As noted above, management support is necessary to integrate crisis management into the day-to-day operations (Katz, 1987; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). "Effective crisis management is a process, not an event," said Caponigro (2000, p. 29).
- Establish a signal detection or early warning system to identify issues that may develop into a crisis in the future. Focus on threats or vulnerabilities that have the greatest likelihood of occurring and would cause the most damaging impact (Coombs, 2007).
- Create and maintain a crisis management plan to can serve as a framework for the school district's response in a crisis and a trained crisis team to lead the response effort

(Fearn-Banks, 2007; Coombs, 2007). According to a study of Metro Atlanta, Georgia, school districts in 2006-2007, 50 percent of respondents found the district crisis management plan to be extremely useful (Gainey, 2009).

- Establish an ongoing media relations program with traditional news media outlets (Williams & Olaniran, 1994; Kaufmann, Kesner, & Hazen, 1994). Establishing positive relationships and credibility with reporters, editors, and news directors when times are good can be invaluable when a crisis occurs.
- Build relationships and a positive reputation between the school district and community in advance of any crisis. Also build relationships with stakeholders who will be important in the event of a crisis. "It is nearly impossible to build a relationship and credibility with stakeholders in the middle of a crisis" (Stocker, 1997, p. 197).
- Expand your district's online presence by emphasizing content and interactivity with stakeholders (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Get visitors accustomed to visiting your Web site, so that they turn to you for information when a crisis occurs. According to the Atlanta study, in a crisis districts communicated with internal audiences primarily through e-mail and with external audiences through e-mail and the district Web site (Gainey, 2009). Telsa Motors used the CEO's blog to explain employee layoffs; the organization found the blog "helped frame the story for the media, minimizing the chance for inaccurate articles" (Kolek, 2009).

#### **Recommendation for actions during a crisis:**

- Take action quickly after the crisis event (Lerbinger, 1997; Burnett, 1998; Sen & Egelhoff, 1991). With traditional media, organizations were expected to have a window of 45 minutes to 12 hours to communicate (Small, 1991). That

window is much smaller today because of the new media. Cell phones, digital cameras, and personal digital devices can be used to capture a breaking crisis and post video or photos online as the crisis happens. Cell phone images after the London bombings or from U.S. Airways Flight 1549 landing on the Hudson River in New York were captured by citizens, posted online, and then used in traditional media outlets (Owen, 2005; Noguchi, 2005; Hannah, 2009). This adds pressure for school districts to be prepared to respond almost immediately in a crisis, getting their message out first. Remember that silence in the face of a crisis is almost always perceived as an admission of guilt (Hearit, 1994).

- Much of crisis literature encourages organizations to speak with "one voice," some times interpreted as reliance on one spokes person. Duhe' suggests that the Canada SARS experience in 2003 demonstrates that it can be useful to rely on a team to communicate "a similarly themed message—multiple faces add credibility when communicating with multiple [*or diverse, my interpretation*] audiences" (Duhe', 2005, pp. 7-13).
- Be prepared to rely on a mix of media to communicate with internal (primarily employees) and external audiences. Face-to-face meetings may be appropriate in some situations, while in others, reliance on Web page updates, RSS feeds, e-mail, Twitter, and interactive Web features may be more beneficial. Take note of where your stakeholders go for information; for example, Millennials spend more time with e-mail, texting, and on social media networks than on the telephone, watching television, or reading magazines, according to one study (Research Brief, 10/28/2009). Identify the key messages that should be communicated to your key

stakeholders (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Those key messages should include statements of concern for those injured or killed.

- Be a quick learner. Organizations need to be able to change strategies quickly, as the crisis evolves (Sen & Egelhoff, 1991).
- Recognize that a crisis exhibits the characteristics of time pressure, control issues, threat level concerns that vary in magnitude, and constraints regarding response options (Burnett, 1998). Having a well-constructed crisis management plan that includes training and simulations will help districts manage these crisis characteristics.

### **Actions to take after a crisis**

The primary actions to take as a crisis is resolved is to continue the communication efforts with internal and external stakeholders (including media), evaluate the crisis response, update the crisis management plan and perhaps the crisis team based on the evaluation, and incorporate what the organization has learned into organizational processes and policies.

### **Conclusion**

Public school systems are charged with promoting the principles of a free, democratic society as they educate kindergarten through high school students throughout the nation. Local communities often turn to schools as shelters and resources in a community crisis and as forums for community involvement. The new decade begins with continuing questions about financial security, societal unrest and tension, and public health concerns. School districts must remain open to the opportunities for public engagement in this crisis-rich environment. Attention to updating crisis management plans must not be put on the back burner. School districts should be encouraged to continue to promote crisis-readiness to provide a

safe learning environment for children and a prepared public institution for our communities.

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