Communicating in Crisis: How Preparedness Leads to Successful Crisis Management

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Complacency is the biggest impediment to disaster preparedness, both at the individual level and at the agency level. People just don't think bad things will happen to them. Still, there are a multitude of crises and disasters that can strike at any time, and most don't come with warnings. So when the unthinkable does happen, lives are often lost.

For public agencies, there is a large cost for lack of preparation. Their roles in disasters, their large employee numbers and the widely distributed facilities they oversee make their readiness and response particularly critical. They also have greater chances of becoming targets for terrorism and other human threats. And these threats are not going away; they're just getting more complex.

Disaster challenges

Incident complexity often extends much further than organizations initially believe. Just consider the many factors involved in an emergency:

- Where it occurs
- Threats to life
- Threats to property
- Political sensitivities
- Organization size
- Jurisdictional boundaries
- Social values risks
- Weather
- Strategies used
- Tactics used
- Policies agencies follow

And it's even more complicated than that, because once a disaster is in motion, circumstances can change rapidly or even have a chain reaction to cause other issues. All it takes is one simple cascading event for the whole scenario to go careening off track. Lack of reliable communications is often one of those precipitating events. Look to Hurricane Katrina, which wiped out communications, leaving emergency responders and citizens with no reliable way to coordinate response.

When the journal, Homeland Security Affairs, followed up post-Katrina with incident commanders about what problems they consistently see at every incident, uncoordinated leadership topped the list. Unclear command structures, multiple commands, conflicting commands, uncooperative agencies and isolated command structures largely trace back to lack of preparation and poor communications.

One expert put it this way: "For 30 years, we've said that communications is our biggest problem because it's a house of cards: When communications fails, the rest of the response fails."

Deep Planning is Often Missing

But what many would never expect as the third biggest problem reported by incident commanders is, in fact, weak planning. It's not that a threat scenario wasn't anticipated, but rather the chain of events following the scenario was only given cursory consideration.

When severe weather strikes, evacuation plans often aren't thought through enough to account for the many scenarios that prevent people from leaving the area. The plans are too simple and lack detail. All of this happens because commitment to planning is lacking. According to the Homeland Security report, "The most fundamental problem to plague planning processes is a lack of commitment to plans across agencies and jurisdictions." That lacking commitment is also evident in communications planning.

Crisis Communications Power the Disaster Preparedness Plan

Communications and information management are the lifeblood of an effective response to a disaster or incident, and are an integral part of a disaster preparedness plan. Right at the very beginning of an incident, you need people to respond to threats in the correct ways. They need to have resources at their fingertips, and communication must stay available across all audiences.

Crisis response fails when your crisis communication plan lacks detail or is nonexistent. People don't naturally do well in crisis situations, and the same is true for an agency that hasn't thought through risks and responses. Without a crisis communication plan, public agencies can't do their best under trying situations.

The Long List of Scenarios

Terrorist attacks ripple throughout an area, and terror arrives in both small and large packages. When public agencies are directly affected by incidents and disasters, they must communicate with a variety of audiences. More importantly, they need assurance that they can reach people through multiple channels. A bomb threat complicated by an active shooter requires massive communication to effectively evacuate, alert offsite personnel and keep family members, the media and the general public informed. If an agency has not considered communication strategies for incidents with cascading events, there is a good chance someone won't get the word. And they just might be the most vulnerable of all the potential audiences.

Natural disasters like earthquakes, sinkholes, drought and extreme heat pose widely varying sets of communications problems. Some instances are immediate, while others evolve over time. A day of 100-degree heat isn't as risky as 10 days of the same high temperatures. Somehow, agencies must plan for as many eventualities as possible. Central to that planning is crisis communications. The affected audience in a heat wave is very different from the one in an earthquake, so without specific planning, communications miss the mark.

FEMA findings show that these five items are the greatest challenges to breaking the cycle of repeating mistakes in incident response:

- Motivation hampered by lack of political will and an unaware public
- Scant, uncoordinated reporting after incidents
- Learning lost from failure to identify lessons and poor or no learning process
- Unimaginative exercises focused on the usual
- Resources in short supply and money flowing to the least-likely scenarios

How can you bring preparation to the job of crisis communication? The answer is by developing a crisis communication plan. Here's how to do it.

State the Obvious

A crisis communication plan has basic requirements. People involved must know its scope and objectives. It might seem obvious that a crisis communication plan is a plan on how to handle communications in a crisis, so what's to state? For one, what constitutes a crisis? What is the difference between a crisis and an incident? What are the criteria for activating the crisis communication plan?

A central requirement for communications is deciding how information gets collected, distributed, analyzed and managed, both during and after an incident. During this time, information will be rapidly going in and out of your communications center, so this is where you can specify how to collect that information and process it.

You want a clear statement of purpose. You also must reinforce how the crisis communication plan fits in with the disaster preparedness plan (DPP) that you've already established. And you want to make it clear that before anything else, during a crisis or incident, the appropriate authorities get notified first. Protection of life and property is the main priority.

Form Your Team and Equip It

The size of your organization determines the size of your crisis communication team. Having one person from each functional area helps you cover the bases. Of course, you should include public affairs, as well as your agency spokesperson. There are also good reasons for including legal counsel, or at least the guidelines your counsel provides for emergency communications. Remember, the team must not only respond during an incident but also assist in creating the crisis communication plan and handle the aftermath of the situation as well.

An important part of your team's effectiveness is its ability to respond to and access working methods of communication. You need to assign a work space where team members can assemble and safely work during a crisis. But you also need to arrange for alternate space in case the primary space is not available. One redundancy is likely adequate in most situations, but if your primary work space is already in a risky place, like a flood plain, and your alternate also carries higher than normal risk, a third option wouldn't hurt.

Identify Threat Scenarios

You will most likely need several intensive brainstorming sessions to detail the threats you might face. Tornadoes don't distinguish between a citizen's residence and a government agency's headquarters. In each threat scenario, there are specific communication needs you must plan to meet.

Each scenario is also likely to cause cascading events. And those then have the potential to become new threats on their own. Evaluation exercises allow for a deep dive into the crises your organization might face. Besides helping you to prepare your communications for these crises, this also might help you avert situations that can be potentially avoided. Once you have identified risks, you might find you can change something to eliminate the risk altogether. You need to go through this process so you understand the risks well enough to formulate your communications needs and responses.

Identify Your Audiences and Communication Methods

Besides your own teams and supporting personnel, you also must communicate with other agencies, the public, entities like insurance companies, the news media, local businesses, elected officials, regulators and those directly involved in the crisis. Your crisis communication plan must outline how to communicate with these audiences and should make it easy for you to single out groups for specific communications.

A next step is to collect all the contact information you need for communicating with these various audiences. Your human resources function already has that information about your internal audiences, like employees, vendors, etc., but now is the time to ensure it's up to date. Individuals often don't tell HR when their contact information changes. This is also the stage at which to consider adopting an emergency notification system, or mass notification system. These systems help you regularly confirm accurate contact information while also allowing you to send notifications your audiences using multiple communication channels. These include phone, text messages, email, instant messages and even secure mobile applications.

Phone trees have become remnants of yesteryear and do not provide the level of reliability and speed needed when responding to a crisis. The Department of Homeland Security calls emergency notification systems a critical part of the disaster plans used by its operational components. And there are compelling examples of ENS successes claiming life-saving results, like this one from emergency management officials in Tyler County, Texas.

If your agency has far-reaching responsibilities during disasters, it's a good idea to get key people authorized to use FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). When your emergency notification system allows authorized users to connect to IPAWS, you can reach extended audiences including the general public and people who haven't opted to receive email, text or phone notifications. For example, you could reach visitors to the area using TV, radio and even digital signs. You could also target particular geographies by using specific cell towers.

One aspect of communicating with your audiences is listening. Today, you have multiple ways to do that. Keeping communications open across agencies, and spending time with people in your larger organization, is incredibly important for cementing relationships that can endure through crises. Using social-media analytics tools and targeted automatic searches like Google Alerts provide invaluable information leading up to and through disasters.

Name and Train Spokespersons

You don't want just anybody talking to the public or the media. The public has a short attention span, and the media tries to fit news to that constraint. That makes it very likely that unprepared and untrained spokespeople won't get out the message you want. Worse, the message will get lost altogether in a sea of misinformation.

Besides training, spokespeople need fact sheets, talking points, background information and other collateral material that reinforce their role and messages. For every disaster or incident scenario, try to come up with a press-release template and create preliminary press-release statements. These have standard, obvious wording for release at the early part of an incident, if nothing more than just acknowledging that something has happened. They show that the organization is aware and is therefore working on the issue.

Specify Actions During the Response Stage

Use this section of the crisis communication plan to outline a hierarchy of actions to follow once you activate the disaster response plan.

Here are the key activities:

- Emergency response is the phase in which activities that preserve life and property take place, and they happen before all else. Evacuations, first aid and actions that prevent further loss of life or greater destruction fit into this phase.

- Next, the communications team activates. Here's where you specify the conditions under which it activates, where it assembles and other pertinent information about its functional directives. If you use an ENS, you can have the team easily singled out from the larger contact list so you can notify members exclusively.

- With the communications team assembled, it's time to assess the situation. Here, you specify how the team will collect, analyze, filter and use information about the incident and how they decide on the types of communications actions to take. This is also a good place to outline how the team decides to disband and reassemble if its members are threatened.

- Once the team has defined the initial communications actions, you must then specify how they should craft the messaging to each segment of the larger audience. You must also specify how communications get delivered to the various audiences. Your ENS will provide robust options that you can tailor to each audience. Here is where you also specify what exactly requires spokesperson activities, like on-camera interviews. Some messaging will go to staff, others to other agencies and still others to the public and the media. If authorized, detail how the team should use IPAWS.

- Finally, specify how the communications team proceeds through the remainder of the event. Outline response times for new messaging as the situation changes and detail how team members decide on staff levels.

The last two sections of the crisis communication plan first cover steps to take post-crisis to preserve information and data for legal use, as well as for analysis. Specify how information gets grouped and assign functional responsibility for preserving and archiving data. Also assign timeframes for analysis and for reporting so lessons learned aren't lost. Don't forget to search for what went right so you can preserve actions that contributed to that.

The second step post-crisis is actually the ongoing process of testing the communications plan, training people, evaluating and adjusting the plan as the organization, threats and the environment change.

There is ample evidence that preparation and practice make all the difference in confronting disasters and incidents affecting public agencies. You've no doubt taken the best preparation step by implementing a disaster preparedness plan. By creating your crisis communication plan, you empower your DPP to function at its highest level.

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