Defining Crisis Communication

No Person or Organization Is Immune
Some Crises Are Extraordinary

September 11, 2001
Strategy

- Full disclosure
  - Tell the truth
  - Tell it quickly
  - Tell it YOURSELF
A Never-Ending Story

- 2008 U.S. economic crisis
- Sanlu, Chinese food company
- 2009 CDC and H1N1 flu outbreak
- Christmas 2009 Suicide bomber fails
- 2010 Haiti earthquake
- 2010 BP oil rig explodes; worst oil spill in U.S. history
Crises Not Always Negative
Definition of “Crisis”: “BIG TROUBLE”
Defining A Crisis

- Surprise
- Threat
- Short response time
A Working Definition

An organizational crisis is a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals.
It Doesn’t Take Much . . .
Key Words

• Unexpected
• Non-routine
• Produces uncertainty
• Creates opportunities
• Threat to image, reputation, or high-priority goals
Unexpected

• A surprise

• Could it have been anticipated?
Non-routine

• Routine problems are, routine
• Occur daily
• Crises are non-routine events
  – Requires non-routine solutions/measures
    • Exxon-Valdez
“The lesson I learned from that crisis and have since applied to other crises is that once the crisis begins and the public hysteria begins, it is too late to worry about your PR. All you really do is hang on, get on with the work, and continue to do what you think is best and most honest.”

George Mason, APR
Vice President, Bradley/McAfee Public Relations
In Wake of the Crisis

- All companies in Alaskan waters have crisis plans approved by the state.
- One month after spill, Exxon had equipment for full-scale cleanup.
Crisis Produce Uncertainty

- Can last for years
- 9/11
Creates Opportunities

- 9/11; Condoleezza Rice
- First Gulf War
Threat to Image, Reputation

- Threatens image
- Threatens reputation
- Can threaten entire industry
- Can destroy the organization
Ask …

• Does the company have a crisis communications plan on hand?
• Does the company have a list of obvious catastrophes that could happen to the company?
• Does the company have an ongoing effort to communicate what it is doing to its primary publics, internal and external?
How Likely Is The Crisis?

• 0—Impossible; that is, the crisis has basically no chance of occurring
• 1—Nearly impossible
• 2—Remotely possible
• 3—Possible
• 4—Somewhat probable; has happened to similar companies
• 5—Highly probably; may or may not have previously occurred in the company, but warning signs are evident
What Is The Potential Damage?

• 0—No damage, not a serious consequence
• 1—Little damage, can be handled without much difficulty, not serious enough for the media’s concern
• 2—Some damage, a slight chance that the media will be involved
• 3—Considerable damage, but still will not be a major media issue
• 4—Considerable damage, would definitely be a major media issue.
• 5—Devastating, front-page news, could put company out of business
Types of Crises

• Intentional Crises

• Unintentional Crises
Intentional Crises

- Terrorism
- Sabotage
- Workplace violence
- Poor risk management
- Poor employee relationships
- Hostile takeovers
- Unethical leadership
Unintentional Crises

- Hurricanes
- Tornadoes
- Earthquakes
- Volcanoes
- Floods
Uncertainty

“The inability to determine the present or predict the future.”
Lesson 1

- Organization members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.
Lesson 2

- Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.
Exxon Valdez

Communications
Lesson #3

• Threat is perceptual
Lesson #4

- Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis, regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.
What Questions Are Being Asked?

- Was this a terrorist attack?
- Anyone killed?
- What happened?
- Who is responsible?
- Why did it happen?
- Who is affected?

- What should we do?
- Who can we trust?
- What should we say?
- How should we say it?
- Will there be more attacks?
Rule of Thumb

• Tell the public:
  – What you know
  – What you don’t know
  – What you’re going to do to answer the questions you’ve been asked
Learning Through Failure

Crisis = Opportunity
Learning Requires Desire To Learn

• Change beliefs and attitudes
  – Individuals
  – Organizations

• Behaviors change
Four Ways Orgs Fail To Learn From Failures

- Scanning failures
  - Not paying attention to problems
    - Arrogance, lack of resources, or inattention
- Integration failures
  - Putting the puzzle together to avoid crises
- Incentive failures
  - Not rewarding those who report problems
- Learning failures
  - Not drawing important lessons from crises
Johnson & Johnson

• 1982 Textbook case ... until
  – Tylenol poisonings were caused by outside forces
    • Unpredictable surprises

• Recent years
  – Child overdoses, liver damage
    • Predictable surprises
Opportunity 1

• Failure becomes an opportunity to recognize a potential crisis or to prevent a similar crisis in the future.
Opportunity 2

• Organizations can avoid crises by learning from other organizations’ failures and crises
Vicarious Learning

• Learn from others’ mistakes/crises
  – Nike In Vietnam
  – Exxon-Valdez
Organizational Memory

• If the learned point isn’t retained, what use is it when you need it?
  – Bhopal, India, 1984
  – Union Carbide
    • Deadly gas leak
Opportunity 3

- Organizational training and planning should emphasize the preservation of previous learning in order to make organizational memory a priority.
Unlearning

• This is the kicker

  – Organizations and people need to sometimes
    unlearn practices that are no longer effective
Results From Unlearning

• Expands options
• Contract options
• Grafting
The Goals

- Contain the crisis
- Limit harm to people and property
- Provide aid and assistance to those harmed
- Move beyond the crisis
- Seize on the opportunity presented to learn, grow, and become stronger
Leaders Remain Visible

- Leaders should be visible during a crisis
  - Former NYC Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, 9/11
  - Former J&J CEO James Burke, 1982
Circle The Wagons
Be Honest

• Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.
  – In all organizational contexts, engaged, open, and honest leadership is critical to successful crisis management.
Poor Leadership

- Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.
  
  – Sun Tzu

  – Machiavelli
The Leader As The Spokesperson

• Aggressive media
• Uncertainty
• Requires media training
  – Murder boards
• Understand needs of the media
• How to respond to questions effectively
Shooting Incident

White House Briefing

V.P. Dick Cheney injures bird hunter accidentally

News. For desktop news: Pipeline @ CNN.com/international
Honor Stakeholder Values

- A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization’s leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.
Apologies Are OK

• Leaders have specific communication obligations and duties for managing and learning from crises.
5 Tips For Success

• Simulation exercises
• Table-topping
• Right-way/wrong-way demonstrations
• Analyzing the other guy’s problems
• War games
Three Rules To Live By

• Never say, “No comment”
• Never assume the story will go away if ignored
• Never speculate
Strategy

• Full disclosure
  – Tell the truth
  – Tell it quickly
  – Tell it YOURSELF