

“Managing Communications Before, During and After a Crisis”
By Richard J. Toth
Lecturer, University of Maryland Department of Communication*

As Michael Wood points out in “When Crisis Happens... Will You be Ready?” (“IT Strategist” Newsletter June 2005, www.ganttthead.com), the chances and sources of crises keep increasing. Whether preventing, coping with or following up on a crisis -- project managers must be prepared to communicate strategically to minimize risk and maximize opportunities during times of greatest challenges and opportunities. To be ready to deal with organizational life or death, you must know the right questions to ask, then try to answer. Here’s a sampling:

1. What WORST-CASE SCENARIOS could hurt your organization?

Brainstorm the range of possibilities, ranging from natural disasters to human error or scandal. Next, think and ask hard about which of the scenarios is most harmful (vulnerability) and most likely to occur. *(You may want to rank them on a scale similar to the accompanying vulnerability/probability Chart I.)*

Corollaries to this first question are:

- A. Do you have a procedure to identify the first signs of a potential or actual crisis?
- B. Are there “triggering events” that will tip you off to symptoms or diagnosis of a crisis?
- C. How do you determine the scope and longevity of the problem or potential problem?
- D. Do you have a way of evaluating short- and long-term impact?

Paying attention to these considerations will help you and your organization determine how important the situation is, whether it’s a blip or systemic, and how much or little needs to be done to control damage or change behavior and perceptions.

2. Do you have a crisis management/communications TEAM for the situation?

This group may be different from, smaller or bigger than the IT or company decision makers and influencers you may be used to working with. Be sure there’s no doubt about the roles and responsibilities of each member as you prepare for a crisis. For example, who’s in charge of developing messages and responses? Who gives approvals? *(See Chart II.)*

3. Do you have a crisis management/communications PLAN and PRACTICE it?

Research indicates that many organizations have failed to adequately plan for a crisis; even fewer have practiced scenarios to detect, gauge, handle and follow up on a crisis. Although it's difficult to predict the exact details of what may happen, just experiencing the possibilities and working together as a team enhances the likelihood of successfully dealing with reality. Periodic exercises, every six to 12 months or so, also helps keep the dust off the plan and allows the team to fine-tune the plan according to changes in and out of the organization. *(See the accompanying Checklist for sample elements of a crisis plan.)*

4. Have you determined who your SPOKESPERSON is?

Often the choice of spokesperson depends on the seriousness or the complexity of the situation. For example, a life-or-death crisis may require the presence of your CEO on scene; at other times, the CIO or project manager may be the best choice. Most importantly, the spokesperson should be trained and practiced to represent the organization in the specific situation at hand. He or she should know how and what to listen, communicate and respond to queries and complaints. The spokesperson should always have a back-up and key members of the team or their local or regional representatives should be prepared to speak with "one voice in many different languages to each key public" inside and outside the organization.

5. Do you have an internal KEY CONTACT/NOTIFICATION system?

Again, depending on the situation, knowing who contacts whom and how in a timely manner is important. Having several ways of reaching key "insiders" on and off regular business hours is crucial. Frequently practice and update contact information, including tests of the ripple effect of communication in priority order.

6. Have you identified and prioritized KEY PUBLICS, or AUDIENCES, to communicate with?

As a complement to your internal communications, be sure you've "sliced and diced" the groups that have the most important right or need to know about a situation. Know who and how many are in each group and what stake or vested interest they may have in a crisis – as well as the best and fastest way of alerting, updating or getting feedback from them. Your challenge and opportunity is to speak with one voice for the organization to stakeholders, ranging from customers to suppliers and consultants – while addressing and responding to each of their interests and concerns in language they can understand. *(See Chart III.)*

7. Do you have a procedure for receiving, handling INQUIRIES?

Again, knowing your key publics inside and out, will help you be ready for the most likely concerns, questions, complaints, requests and perceptions each group or individual may have about the situation. If you're not ready, physically or psychologically, to receive, respond, document and monitor such communication – you can't plan and strategize the best way to act and communicate according to circumstances.

8. Have you established communications GOALS/OBJECTIVES/STRATEGIES to...

- live up to the mission, vision and values of your organization and goals of your business plan?
- alert and inform those with a need to know?
- position your organization as concerned, caring, credible?
- contain the situation to its appropriate scope and perspective?
- make sure your side of the story is told?
- communicate empathy, compassion and action?

9. Are you prepared to develop, send and receive MESSAGES that are...

- to the point?
- timely?
- honest?
- unified?
- consistent?
- accurate?
- realistic?
- appropriately calming?

10. Have you procedures for FINE-TUNING/EVALUATING...

- actions?
- messages?
- feedback?
- inquiries and complaints?
- exchange/updates of information?
- next steps to plan, implement follow-up actions and maintain lessons learned?

By planning and practicing such Q&A, you can better protect and promote your organization and IT goals, reputation and relationships.

#RT 06/28/05#

**Before joining the faculty on the College Park campus, Professor Toth practiced and taught strategic communications and public and media relations for 30 years in St. Louis, Dallas and Upstate New York. A Fellow accredited by the Public Relations Society of America, he has worked with clients, managers and students in companies, associations, government and not-for-profit organizations – in and out of crises. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Missouri School of Journalism and studied Information Management at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies.*

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VULNERABILITY & PROBABILITY CHART

5					X
4					
3					
2					
1					
	1	2	3	4	5

On Vertical Axis, Rank Situation Code (A, B, etc.) as Most (5) Serious/Vulnerable to Least (1)

Situation Code (See sample categories below):

A=Type of Crisis (e.g., caused externally)

B= Another type of Crisis (e.g., internal causes) C= _____

D= _____ On Horizontal Axis Rank Situation as

E= _____ Most (5) Probable/Likely To Least (1)

X spot indicates situation/issue with most vulnerability, probability

Note: More than one situation can occupy a given box

Below are sample categories of crises/dilemmas/emergencies an organization may encounter.
(Note: Approach or perception to crisis varies significantly depending on whether your company is considered a "victim" or a "perpetrator.")

- Natural or Man-made Disaster (e.g., weather, explosion, fire, negligence)
- Technology Disaster (e.g., your IT – with customer, supplier, consultant, outsource et al)
- Crime/Threat (e.g., embezzlement, terrorism, hacking, vandalism, employee, competitor)
- Legal/Political/Market/Culture (e.g., lawsuit/regulation/discipline; sabotage, scandal)
- Customer, Supplier, Consultant or Outsource (e.g., complaint, service or product failure)
- Privacy vs. Public Right to Know
- Quality/Ethical Code Violation
- Communications Claim (e.g., advertising/PR/marketing promo)
- Product or Service Failure

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SAMPLE CHART II. CRISIS/COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

Member Contact Info Roles/Responsibility Actions/Priority Timing/Deadline Status/Done

SAMPLE CHART III. KEY AUDIENCES/PUBLICS

Public Self-Interests Influencers Strategy Tactics/Channels Message(s) S/D
(Internal & External)

SAMPLE IT CRISIS MANAGEMENT/COMMUNICATIONS CHECKLIST

Company and IT Goal(s):
(Short- and Long-Term)

Communications (Reputation & Relationship) Objective(s)/Strategies:

Emergency/Management Team:
(e.g., CEO? CFO? CIO? VPs? Managers? Other Department Leaders? Consultants?)
Contact List Names & Numbers:

Decision/Approval Process:
Emergency (Inquiry/Complaint) Communications Plans/Procedures:

Project Monitoring/Reporting/Feedback & Follow-up Procedures*:
Triggering Event(s):

Project Spokesperson:
Backup:

Key Contact/Notification System-Schedule:

Priority Stakeholders/Publics/Customers/Influencers/Opinion Leaders/Prospects:
(Positive/Neutral/Negative)

Risk Assessment (Vulnerability/Probability):

Milestone Dates/Situations:

Core Message/Position Statement:

Status/Progress Reports:

*Chronology of Events:

Glossary of Terms:

Fact Sheets:

Q&A:

Training & Role Playing:

Response to Inquiry/Rumor:

Time/Budget-Investment (risk not to invest)/Resources/Timeline Considerations:

MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS/MEASURE SUCCESS/CLIENT-PR ROLES, NEXT STEP?

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