Crisis PR management

Adapted from
Effective Public Relations
Exploring Public Relations
Anticipating Disasters and Crises

- Crises = issues confronting the organisation that have reached the critical stage
- Multiple stages in life cycle of an issue:
  - nonexistent
  - potential
  - dormant
  - imminent
  - current
  - critical
- Planning scenarios with contingency plans
Crisis

An organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly (Pearson & Clair, 1998)
Types of crises

● Lerbinger (1997): 8 types - natural, technological, confrontation, malevolence, skewed management values, deception, management misconduct, business and economic

● Banana index: green (new & emerging issues and problem situations), yellow (current and ripe), brown (old and moldy)
Types of crises

- **Immediate crises**: sudden & unexpected (e.g. plane crash, product tampering, death of a key officer, fire, earthquake, bomb scare, workplace shooting by disgruntled former employee, etc.)
- **Emerging crises**: may erupt suddenly after brewing (e.g. employee dissatisfaction and low morale, sexual harassment, substance abuse, overcharges on government contracts, etc.)
- **Sustained crises**: persist for months or even years (e.g. rumours & speculation reported in media or circulated by word of mouth, etc.)
• 'Unplanned visibility' following crises can turn into events that threaten reputation, credibility and market position (Lukaszewski, 1991)

• Quick public response is critical. Else, vacuum is created and everyone else (media, competitors) will step in to fill the vacuum (CNN former vice president)
<table>
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<th>Stage</th>
<th>Features</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 Detection</td>
<td>The organisation is watching for warning signs or what Barton (1993) calls <em>prodromes</em> (warning signs)</td>
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<td>2 Preparation/prevention</td>
<td>The organisation takes note of the warning signs and prepares plans proactively to avoid the crisis or reactive ones to cope with the crisis if it comes</td>
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<td>3 Containment</td>
<td>Taking steps to limit the length of the crisis or its effects</td>
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<td>4 Recovery</td>
<td>This is the stage where effort is made to get back to the ‘normal’ operational conditions or effectiveness of the organisation</td>
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<td>5 Learning</td>
<td>This is when the organisation reflects and evaluates the experience to consider the negative impacts for the organisation and any possible positive benefits for the future</td>
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Table 20.1 *Fearn-Banks’ five stages of a crisis*

Source: Adapted from Fearn-Banks 2002
Figure 20.1  The 5Cs effective communication model
Common mistakes

- Hesitation – leads to public perception of confusion, callousness, incompetence or lack of preparation
- Obfuscation – perception of dishonesty and insensitivity
- Retaliation – increases tension & intensifies emotion
- Prevarication or equivocation – creates biggest problem
Common mistakes

- Pontification – creates vulnerability by taking high-handed approach without really dealing with issue at hand
- Confrontation – provides others visibility by keeping issue alive, giving them a platform and more to respond to
- Litigation – guarantees even greater visibility & may eliminate more reasonable solutions
Guidelines for preparing

- Identify things that can go wrong & become highly visible; assess vulnerabilities throughout the organisation
- Assign priorities based on which vulnerabilities are most urgent and most likely
- Draft questions, answers and resolutions for each potential crisis scenario
Guidelines for preparing

• Focus on 2 most important tasks – what to do and what to say – during first critical hours
  – Guidelines for 'what to do' may include telephone call tree showing order in which key decision makers need to be informed
  – Guidelines for 'what to say' may include Q&As listing questions likely to be asked by reporters & other publics, appropriate answers, 'standby statements'

• Develop a strategy to contain and counteract, not react and respond
Establishing an information centre

- When crisis happens, it becomes apparent that seemingly unimportant facets have been overlooked & must be given hurried attention
- Weakness = unavailability of information
- Knee-jerk response = jerry-built rumour centre that operates then fades away after crisis
Guidelines

• Should be separate entity where possible with close coordination

• Should be in 2 parts:
  – deal directly with publics, taking questions and providing answers
  – coordinating agency with qualified people available to speak on policy or conduct discussion on issues

• Should have credibility established long before any crisis – accepted source of accurate information

Internal publics should be aware of existence of information centre