

1. What happened?
2. How bad is it?
3. What is being done?
4. What is the potential for escalation?

These questions appear straightforward, but on closer reflection each is surprisingly multifaceted. It is essential to know what questions to ask. The information source may be frantic, injured, or downright confused. As a crisis whisperer, it's your job to extract the most important information as quickly and accurately as possible.

Let's examine them individually in some detail.

2.4.1 What Happened?

If you're getting firsthand information, determine if the source has actually witnessed the events. That is the difference between verified and unsubstantiated firsthand accounting. Even with a firsthand accounting, there can be misperceptions and misinformation. A second accounting from another person might be in order, as time will allow.

If you're getting secondhand information, find out who told your source. How did he or she know it is accurate? Did that person who told your informant actually see what happened, or has the information been passed down the line? Ask for the exact words that were used to describe the situation when your secondhand source was told.

If the information has not been verified, what steps need to be taken while verification is taking place? This could include dispatching of emergency vehicles, making internal notification, planning a statement to the media, referring to your crisis manual, mobilizing your crisis management team, and strategizing the details of your immediate response, should the incident and pertinent facts be verified. In each case, this is a point for fast action and strategically anticipating what may be coming. Respond to the immediate situation and begin preparations for anticipated outcomes, should they materialize.

Make every minute count. Have your prepared crisis manual and checklists ready so that you can act immediately upon verification. Electronic copies of your crisis responsibilities are critical and the Strategic Crisis Leadership Checklist in Chapter 1 can be beneficial. However, a hard copy of your checklists and manual is often easier to navigate for some people during crisis response. It is best if you have sufficient copies of your crisis manual stored at various locations, including at the office, at home, and in the car. I recommend that you keep copies both on your electronic handheld organizers (possibly a proprietary app) and in your computer system. Be certain

you can put your hands on it within minutes no matter where you are – even while traveling.

The more vivid the word picture presented to you, the better sense you can gain of the situation's severity and the steps that must be taken to create order out of chaos.

2.4.2 How Bad Is It?

As you take in information, your goal is to envision the scene as clearly as possible. Here again, visualization is an effective technique. Ask your informant at the scene, “Describe what you see or know in as much detail as possible.” Have the informant describe the location and disposition of the various stakeholders, the status of damaged buildings or equipment, etc. The more vivid the word picture presented to you, the better sense you can gain of the situation's severity and the steps that must be taken to create order out of chaos.

Be careful not to spend too much time gathering initial information. You want to balance getting adequate information with taking necessary immediate response actions. Use a subset of questions to assess severity.

People:

- ▶ What is the impact on stakeholders? Any initial outrage toward the organization?
- ▶ Is there ongoing danger or harm to people? Of what?
- ▶ How many serious injuries or deaths? Are these confirmed?
- ▶ How many people are directly involved?
- ▶ Did some of those who were present feel life-threatening?
- ▶ How many appear to be indirectly involved?
- ▶ Are people in the wider community impacted? How?

Property:

- ▶ Has company property been damaged? How? Severity?
- ▶ Is the damage ongoing or contained?

Business Disruption:

- ▶ Are operations continuing at full/normal levels, partial levels, or stopped altogether?

Surroundings:

- ▶ How widespread is the damage?

- ▶ How have physical assets in the surrounding area been affected?
- ▶ Are there continuing threats to the surrounding area?

Liability and Reputation: Sometimes the cause of an incident can be more damaging than the incident itself. Various media outlets, regulators, competitors, your own employees, and others may be eager to affix blame following a critical incident. Obtain information about the following:

- ▶ Are there issues that could put the reputation of the organization at risk?
- ▶ Is the organization at fault, or perceived to be at fault?
- ▶ In what ways might the organization be blamed?
- ▶ Is there any apparent outrage directed toward the organization, individual employees, or management?
- ▶ To what extent is media involved?
- ▶ What spin is the media (traditional or social outlets) putting on the story, if any, at this point?

2.4.3 What Is Being Done?

The idea here is to get as accurate a picture as possible of the actions already being taken by onsite personnel and others. Again, think – and ask – in terms of people, property, business disruption, and surroundings.

People:

- ▶ Has the situation been contained so that people are safe from continuing harm?
- ▶ Is first aid being administered effectively? If necessary, provide coaching or summon assistance.
- ▶ Is everyone accounted for?
- ▶ Have a sufficient number of emergency vehicles been dispatched? Can this information be verified?
- ▶ Are driveways accessible to emergency vehicles?
- ▶ What is being done for the injured?
- ▶ What is being done with the bodies of fatalities?
- ▶ Which hospitals are utilized?
- ▶ Are employees being protected from distressing sights and media encroachment?

- ▶ Have accommodations been made for family members who may call or arrive at the site?
- ▶ Are members of the media being accommodated, yet restrained from excessive intrusion?
- ▶ What communications need to be given and received? To whom?

Property:

- ▶ What is being done to contain any continuing damage?
- ▶ Is the incident site being protected for investigation?
- ▶ How are the perimeters around the incident site and the entire facility being secured?

Business Disruption:

- ▶ Should production be reduced or halted?
- ▶ Can employees remain at the worksite safely?
- ▶ Should any areas of the facility be shut down? If not, do people need special attention to assure them that they are safe?
- ▶ What needs to be done to continue operations during this situation?

Surroundings:

- ▶ Are neighboring businesses and residents aware of the incident?
- ▶ Is there a need to notify them?

The difference between a well-managed crisis and a situation spun out of control is often a crisis manager's ability to understand the potential for escalation and mitigate against it before it occurs.

2.4.4 What Is the Potential for Escalation?

This last of the four key questions can be one of the most important. You need to know how the situation might escalate in severity and what can be done to avoid a worsening of conditions. Does the crisis response need to escalate to higher management levels? The difference between a well-managed crisis and a situation spun out of control is often a crisis manager's ability to understand the potential for escalation and mitigate against it before it escalates.

Be sure to ask:

Consult with your attorney regarding how and where to maintain this documentation. Note also the preferences of your legal team. Some attorneys prefer no notes be maintained. Research clearly demonstrates that writing helps managers make more effective decisions on a timely basis. If your legal team doesn't want documentation maintained, is it possible to organize yourself through notes that will be destroyed as a matter of policy as soon as they are no longer needed for crisis response?

Three Key Questions

One way to prioritize action items in the immediate aftermath is to ask yourself these three questions:

1. What needs to stop that is presently occurring?
2. What needs to start that is not presently happening?
3. In what ways can this situation escalate in severity?

In our shooting scenario, we needed to stop employees from roaming outside the building with a gunman on the loose and emergency services dispatched. We needed to start effective first aid and professional life support for the victims as soon as possible. And the situation could escalate if the gunman continued to shoot.

2.9 Four Categories of Concern

There are four basic areas of concern for senior management and all the people who support them whether in a crisis or during normal business. These topics – people, business disruption, reputation, and finances – can also help you identify your action priorities in the early aftermath of a disaster.

Beware, however, of outrage if you are perceived as putting productivity above the needs and safety of people. As a general rule, you must address the people needs before the back-to-business needs.

2.91 People

No organization is better than its people. Human issues come first, especially when people are injured and deeply impacted. What should be done to address the needs and concerns of people? How wide a circle of people is impacted? Who are they? Are they in continuing danger? What information do we need to give and receive from these individuals?

2.92 Business Disruption

The ability of the organization to continue normal productivity can be seriously affected by a crisis. For example, business interruption may come