

happened,” inform concerned audiences that investigations are underway. However, crisis containment might need to be much bigger in scope than the specific bull’s eye of the incident. Remember Johnson & Johnson recalled Tylenol nationwide, even though the deaths from tainted pills were only in Chicago. Conversely, Charles Steger of Virginia Tech tried to contain an initial murder of two by not notifying all students and exposed an additional 31 people to the mass murderer approximately two hours later. So, first do the right things. “Spinning” communications will almost never overcome poor crisis decision-making.

Typically, it’s best not to admit negligence or liability. Make no promises concerning financial compensation or repair of damages unless fully agreed upon as a solution by your management team. When appropriate, put the situation into perspective by noting, for example, the outstanding safety record of your company or its leadership in community affairs; the one-in-a-million chance that this incident could happen; how it is isolated to only a small portion of the company; or how the company itself may have been victimized. In 2005 for example, Anna Ayala publicly reported (ultimately falsely) that she “chomped” down on a human finger in chili at a Wendy’s restaurant. Among other messaging, the communications from the company needed to remind the public that the restaurant chain sells thousands of delicious bowls of chili to satisfied customers every day. Strive to “paint word pictures” in the minds of audience members that convey your desired messages and replace unwanted mental images.

**Any evidence, or even hint, that you are being dishonest or withholding important information can be expected to elicit immediate and uncomfortable scrutiny from them all.**

### **5.13 Honesty – the Best Policy – Does Not Mean Saying Everything**

Dishonesty can cause a crisis to escalate faster than any other single mistake. When you or your organization are in the crisis spotlight, the media, attorneys, government officials, and the public are naturally looking for scandal, negligence, and scapegoats. Any evidence, or even hint, that you are being dishonest or withholding important information can be expected to elicit immediate and uncomfortable scrutiny from them all.

However, you don’t have to say everything you know in your outgoing communications. Sometimes you may have information that you, quite appropriately, choose not to divulge publicly. It is rarely a good idea, for example, in the immediate aftermath of the crisis to discuss issues of responsibility and cause. You will rarely know the entire story yourself at this point, and you will have plenty of time once things settle down for

investigations both by yourselves and by any interested outside parties. You also want to avoid any statement that could be construed as the basis of a liability action.

However, beware of giving an appearance of deception by omission, if it should be learned that you are holding back important information. Discuss both the pros and cons of how much to tell. Consider, for example, what impact there could be if the information is disclosed willingly by you – or, alternatively, is uncovered by a reporter.

### **5.14 Communication Is a Human Art**

In this book, I emphasize the too often ignored human impacts of crisis. At a time of crisis, your employees and other key relationships of your company can be allies – or your enemies. They have inside information. And what they hear from you, and how they hear it, can make a difference. Make sure the people in and close to your organization are given accurate and timely information. Outrage has been the observed result time and again on crises I've handled when employees obtained information from sources outside the company, instead of from management.

Your employees spend one third of each workday with you. The company provides their livelihoods and a considerable part of their sense of self-identification. They will identify closely with any crisis that hits the company, and feel affected, whether they are injured or not. Unfortunately, the unenlightened company pays attention only to external constituencies at a time of crisis, addressing only the immediate needs of those who might be injured. However, wise management takes a more holistic view, supporting – and in turn being supported by – its workforce and other key stakeholders.

## **5.2 Media Relations During a Crisis**

If your crisis gets their attention, the media will put out a story, whether you participate or not. While you do not have control over reporters and editors, you can manage the information you give them, and have a great deal of influence on how you are presented.

*When a crisis starts.* At the most rudimentary level, use prepared holding statements if the media contacts you before you are prepared to provide incident specific statements. Holding statements can be prepared ahead of time and preapproved by management for use in the early aftermath of any crisis. This will buy time until you can organize your response and draft messages specific to the event. Convey who within the organization has authority to provide these holding statements and to which audiences.

mation or action steps you expect of them, and come to an understanding about when and how these requirements will be carried out.

**Waiting too long to notify top leaders about a crisis can dangerously delay the application of essential corporate resources to the problem.**

## 5.4 Notifying Throughout the Organization

As you make notifications, you may run into a fairly common scenario – a tendency for the individual charged with notifying senior management (possibly you) to delay notification of top brass in order to learn more about what's really happened and to investigate why the incident occurred. It's only natural that your CEO will have immediate questions, and you will want to be prepared to answer them. But sometimes you just can't. It is usually more important to notify early and answer, "I don't know," than to wait to cover all the bases before notification.

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### 5.4.1 Board of Directors

Although board members do not typically play an active role in the day-to-day operations of most companies, they do have fiduciary responsibility for the organization and its wellbeing. Notifying board members can help your organization manage the crisis and minimize exposure, depending on your board's areas of influence and expertise.

Most often, the CEO is the one who notifies the board. In any case, senior management should determine the threshold for contacting board members in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. The threshold for contacting the board of directors can be defined ahead of time, or when management feels that their input would be beneficial. In the event of significant financial, reputational, or business resumption threat to the company, the board probably will want to be notified sooner rather than later. Information that you provide about the crisis might be the catalyst for notification to the board of directors. Stay vigilant for core assets that may be at risk as the crisis unfolds and know whom to notify within your organizational culture.

What information might you need from board members? It depends, again, on the imminent risk and the type of crisis. Are there high-level contacts in the industry or in government who could help the company manage a response to a serious crisis situation? Board members are chosen for their many contacts, industry-related expertise, or other valuable experience they have. Their input and assistance could be invaluable.

## 5.4.2 Corporate Counsel

In nearly every imaginable scenario, your corporate counsel would figure high on the call list. Crises are high probability times for litigation. Containment of liability exposures will be essential as you move through the post-crisis period.

Depending on your culture, the lawyer may become the designated spokesperson. However, this can give the impression that the company is primarily interested in minimizing legal exposures. It is typically better to have a non-attorney spokesperson, one who is perceived as authoritative and well briefed about the legal boundaries in outgoing communications. Whether or not your attorney is your spokesperson, you may face an inherent conflict between legal and PR concerns. Attorneys are concerned about minimizing communications that could increase liability. PR personnel are communicators whose role is to get clear, transparent, and timely messages out to reduce misunderstandings and to tell the company's side of the story.

Another reason to notify your attorney early on is to safeguard evidence while establishing attorney-client privilege, when appropriate. Should a member of the legal staff be on hand to ensure that there were no improprieties or any kind of tampering? Coordinating early defense decisions with your insurer and appointed defense attorneys is yet another action that your legal staff may need to address. This is the time to find out what your attorney would want according to each foreseeable risk.

If the headquarters of your company is at a considerable distance from the site of the crisis or if outside legal expertise is needed, it may be of immediate importance to retain a local law firm to represent your interests there.

## 5.4.3 Corporate Security

Your security/assets protection manager may have a significant role to play in the immediate post crisis response. Determine in advance what this person will need to know. Anticipate questions such as, "*Is a crime suspected?*" and "*Is the perimeter of the facility secure?*" In turn, what do you need to know from him or her? Your immediate security actions can make a huge difference in your defensibility. If you allow evidence to be contaminated, there may be a lingering perception that you are culpable. Timely notification and coordination with your security department will help your organization take critical defensive action.

## 5.4.4 The Rest of the List

The list also includes other staff positions, customers, vendors, franchisees, trade groups, unions, financial analysts, silent partners, insurers, government