



CRISIS MANAGEMENT AS A LEADER - QUICK TIPS

Anger spreads far more easily over social media than more positive emotions like joy. While new technologies like social media can provide valuable opportunities for promoting both personal and institutional images, they have also become a conduit for outrage. Local issues from classroom matters to on-campus racism can escalate quickly into full-blown international crises. Preparing in advance to recognize and manage a social media firestorm as effectively as possible can minimize damage to you and your institution.

What Are Public Relations Crises and Why Do They Happen?

A typical 'PR' crisis is a situation in which some incident causes a significant degree of consternation or drama, and the reputations and integrity of an individual, a department, or an institution potentially become threatened.

- They typically draw intense, often quite negative media coverage; can damage reputations; and create stress and conflict within a unit or institution.
- The majority do not happen without any backstory or build up at all; they usually grow out of a series of events and incidents that could have served as warning signs.
- The most common causes are human error, bad planning, unethical or dishonest behavior, unresponsive culture, leadership failure, poor judgment, and poor maintenance practices.
- Examples are plentiful, e.g.: serious injuries resulting from equipment failure or natural disasters, theft of unit resources, inappropriate behavior by students, sexual impropriety on the part of faculty or staff, academic fraud... the list goes on and on.
- More than 80% of public relations crises are caused internally by acts of leaders (50%) or by other employees (30%).

Identifying A Growing Crisis

One of the most critical aspects of crisis management is to actively monitor internal and external information channels in order to recognize that a crisis is brewing. There are agencies that constantly monitor social media and it can be useful to have a relationship developed with these groups in advance of needing it. Warning signs of a crisis include:

- Matters that attract unwanted media attention or sudden increase of negative commentary on the internet
- Incidents that jeopardize public safety or involve serious personal injury
- Activities that lead to law enforcement or regulatory involvement
- Matters that result in significant strike actions
- Behavior by leaders or employees that reflects badly on the institution's reputation.

How to Handle a Crisis Effectively as a Leader





Given the fast-moving social media world, having an experienced adviser to guide your response to a situation can be invaluable and essential. Acquaint yourself with your institution's public affairs staff and know who to call if something arises that looks problematic. Your institution may have an expert on retainer; if so, forming a relationship early with that expert can be helpful.

Elements of a response generally include the following:

- **Having a general plan that can be adapted as needed.** Staying aware of crisis risks and having a detailed crisis management outline can help you act more effectively once a situation emerges. Knowing who to contact immediately when a situation arises is a key element, and letting people in your unit know that there are such resources available and encouraging them to reach out for guidance is a good practice.
- **Respond immediately.** Craft a response for media and the public as quickly as possible. Delayed responses can spur the spread of bad information. Delayed responses also provide more time for the media and social media users to develop their own narratives, which may differ significantly from the facts on the ground. Having a designated spokesperson that all institutional players should point to is necessary in ensuring consistent accounts across media responses.
- **Understand the facts.** Try to gather and document complete information about the core events and their potential impact on the parties involved. Recognize that there may be public interest even when you feel the matter should be held privately.
- **When faculty research is attacked, understand institutional constraints and provide support.** If a social media outburst is focused on activities that fall within a faculty member's institutional role and responsibilities, an early statement can be very helpful. It should recognize the faculty member's standing in the field (where applicable), include a statement supporting the research (where applicable), and a statement affirming the right and responsibility of faculty members to pursue difficult questions even where controversial. This should be developed in collaboration with the leadership of your institution who are experienced in dealing with the media.
- **Communicate internally.** Maintain open lines of communication with employees and students. The media will seek out anyone with any connection to the institution for information, so it is critical that as many people as possible have the correct and current information about the facts. It may be beneficial to identify ways that employees and students can assist with the crisis, ranging from speaking publicly in defense of the situation to talking through what has happened.
- **Take responsibility.** Attempts to cover up a crisis almost universally make things worse. Acknowledging a problem and showing that you and your institution are taking responsibility and actions to address the situation can blunt the force of negative responses. Take the concerns of students, faculty, and the public seriously and connect them with appropriate resources.
- **Establishing trust and credibility.** While communicating about the crisis, there are four elements to establishing trust and credibility:
 - *Competence and expertise:* education, institutional roles, as well as previous experience and demonstrated abilities in the current situation can enhance the public's perception of expertise and competence in the person sharing the message.
 - *Honesty and openness:* try to convey all the relevant information to the public. If information has not been verified or cannot be shared, be transparent about that, while reassuring the public you will do your best to keep them informed.





- *Empathy and caring:* showing compassion, sympathy, passion, and concern can make the message appear more credible, believable, acceptable, and even likable to the audience.
- *Commitment and dedication:* demonstrate that leadership is present at the heart of the situation until it has been resolved. Resolution and follow-up should be committed to from the start and maintained until the end.
- **Work with professionals.** Sometimes it is best to work with experienced experts to handle the crisis most effectively and in a timely manner. Communication teams within each university or institution should have crisis management plans ready to be implemented if needed.

Time of Web 2.0: Handling Social Media Crises

In addition to the strategies listed above, follow these tangible steps to handle a crisis:

- Avoid arguing with people on social media, because that will likely only harm you and your institution's reputation. Instead, move discussions out of the public eye and address individuals' concerns in a more private and professional environment.
- Pause all social media activity and speak with one voice about the matter. Be sure to draw upon facts rather than speculation.
- Put together a well thought-out public statement, and share it first on the original platform where the problem started.
- Sometimes staying calm and giving people space to express their frustrations is the best response. Do not try to cover up or delete negative comments, because that will stimulate stronger negative feelings. Respectfully acknowledge concerns and emphasize that necessary actions are being taken to resolve the situation.

