



**2016 CLM Annual Conference
April 6-8, 2016
Orlando, FL**

Read All About It: Crisis Media Management

Section I: The Ugly

a. Incidents involving criminal threat to the public

Example:

Judge, on recommendation of Sheriff, releases County Jail's non-violent and/or non-parole holding prisoners during holiday weekend on "furlough". Inmate, with a parole hold, is mistakenly released. Inmate does not return on Monday. Ex-girlfriend of inmate calls Sheriff's Office and Prosecutor's Office 6 times over course of 5 days after he was due back, complaining that the inmate has repeatedly called and threatened her over phone. Each time, call is either passed on to someone else caller is told the inmate is in jail again, or complaints are simply ignored. 6 days after being due back, inmate shows up at ex-girlfriend's apartment, and shoots her multiple times before turning the gun on himself. Ex-girlfriend's teenagers come home from school and find them both dead.

Judge returns from holiday vacation, only to be met by the press at the airport. They want answers. Judge blames Sheriff. Press then confronts Sheriff at his office. Sheriff blames judge.

Problems:

Judge was responsible for release of inmate. He had the ultimate sign-off in the release. He had not reviewed the total release file before signing off. His response to the press was:

"He was the Sheriff's prisoner—ask him".

Sheriff had neglected to review the release forms before sending them to Judge. His response to the press was:

"It is his job to review the release forms; it is not my fault."

The impact of these statements show to the public that neither the Judge or the Sheriff had any idea as to what was going on and, rather than communicate an acknowledgment that issues had come up in the handling of the case, and were working towards clarification.

b. Incidents involving law enforcement response to crisis

Example:

Disturbed man continuously calls 911 during the course of an evening. Does not report emergencies, rather simply tries to engage in conversation. The final call of the night, the man says he is going to burn something down if he people do not listen to him. Dispatcher does not know what to do, so asks the Shift Supervisor what to do. Supervisor instructs the Dispatcher to just call the man's mother and tell her to take him to hospital. Dispatcher then goes off duty, but does not report the incident to the next Dispatcher. Two hours later, the trailer next to the man's trailer is in flames. Occupant of the trailer dies in the fire.

The next day, the Sheriff holds a press conference and blames the Shift Supervisor for not preventing the disaster.

"If my Deputy had done his job, that man would be alive today."

Problems:

The Sheriff had not taken an initial investigation into even the cursory facts leading up to the tragedy. His response to the press was not an assurance that all facts would be explored and the public advised, but a simple conclusion of wrongdoing by the Shift Supervisor and a denunciation.

c. Incidents requiring accurate information provided to the public.

Example:

Intoxicated man is arrested by Sheriff's Deputies after an escape attempt from a hospital. Man begins fighting with deputies, resulting in a violent takedown. Deputies were reportedly angry at the man for fighting with them, and made taunting threats to him when he was finally subdued.

Deputies take man to jail for booking. Man is seen on video as being processed and led off to his cell. 20 minutes later, the man is seen hanging in his cell, an apparent suicide. He is declared dead.

Coroner's report states a belief that the death was a "homicide" and not a suicide. The Sheriff's Office vehemently disagrees. A series of news releases by both the Coroner and the Sheriff produce a media battle which includes stories run by large city news agencies.

(Coroner's husband ran unsuccessfully against the present Sheriff in a highly contentious race)

Coroner said:

“(Inmate) did not commit suicide...he could not have hanged himself, but had to have help in making it look like he did. There were only four individuals who escorted him to the holding cell..one or more or all of these individuals had to have had some part in the death of (Inmate)”:

Sheriff replied:

“I am disgusted that someone with a political agenda against me would try to hurt my people like this to get at me. When the real professionals finish their investigation, the truth will come out.”

Problems:

Rather than make no definitive statement to the press until an investigation completed, the Coroner made a conclusion and stated such.

The Sheriff then created an issue but openly challenging the qualifications of the Coroner to make such a conclusion.

The public was rightfully confused and concerned because of the exchanges.

Section II: The Bad

- a. The Hydra – many heads and many statements = many headaches
 - The Board of Education receives notice that one of the coaches has allegedly done some things with students that is not appropriate. There is a media feeding frenzy.
 - A meeting of the Board of Education takes place, in executive session, to discuss all of the allegations and the best way to go about dealing with the negative publicity.
 - The school board president is facing re-election in 4 months and sees this as an opportunity to see her name in print, as someone who is “on top of the situation.”
 - Other school board members are receiving emails from the public and they are responding, based upon less than full information.
 - Some of the board members begin communicating in substance of what was discussed in executive session and negative things are said about various teachers.
 - The local newspaper decides to issue a public records requests and obtains the emails.
 - Various mixed messages are given, the various members are contradicting one another and the comedy of errors gets just as big as the original allegation.
 - The lesson learned is that it is crucial to have one voice, everyone else should refer questions to that “voice” and there will be consistency.
- b. The publicity seeker = more headaches
 - With social media and online newspapers, we now live in a sound bite, instant gratification society. When the media comes calling, getting out in front of the story can be important.

- It is crucial to do so after careful consideration of the issues and agreeing upon a team plan.
 - All team members have to be in step with the plan and adhere to it.
 - The individual who wants to “become the story” naively thinks that his or her message will be well received and fairly reported. Such is not always the case.
 - The individual who is anxious to become the spokesperson, can become misquoted, tripped up, and often times their desire to be the lead on the story, causes them embarrassment, personally and as a representative of the entity.
 - The importance is to avoid running to the media, while at the same time being responsive.
- c. The best way to save face is to keep the lower half shut
- The media, social media and public often “demand answers”
 - It is crucial to have an early meeting, with all involved individuals, and agree upon the manner in which the media release will be handled.
 - It is important to notify the requesting media that they are not being ignored and that the “no comment” answer is not a good one.
 - At the same time, answers such as “Our spokesman on this is Mr. Jones, we want to make sure that accurate information is communicated to the public. Mr. Jones will have the ability to make that information available to you and his information will be accurate. He is the spokesperson on this issue and I can give you his contact information to assist.”
 - That is never perceived as a denial or refusal to comment, but it avoids any substantive statement being made that will jeopardize the crisis management.
- d. Dishonesty is not the best policy
- Believe it or not, there have been instances where part of the decision making team will suggest that the public will “never know” what actually happened.
 - Operating with that game plan is a recipe for disaster.
 - It is imperative that honest assessments be given.
 - We have all heard the phrase “the cover-up is worse than the crime”. Crisis management demands accuracy and honesty. If that is not given, the public, the media, the social media, the blogs and everything that tangentially touches those will cascade in even more negative publicity.
 - As I heard at a seminar, “bad news does not get better with time.”

Section III: The Not-So-Bad – Minimizing the Impact of a Negative Scenario

- a) Honesty and Change – While not always the first approach that comes to mind, particularly where attorneys are involved early, being honest and forthcoming is often one of the most effective. Though there may be litigation and liability exposures that limit this approach, where appropriate it can be one of the most powerful approaches. The acknowledgement that something improper was done, that you are willing to acknowledge and explain what and to the extent possible why it went wrong and how you plan to change so that does not occur in the

future is neutralizing. Additionally, where it involves an agency or product that generally enjoys public support, it taps into the majority's willingness to give second chances. One caveat is that if this approach is taken the honesty must be exactly that, honest. Half-truths and manipulation of the facts, if discovered, will generally prove to make a bad situation worse.

- b) **When the Law is on Your Side Use It** – At times what is perceived as an unpopular action is completely legal. Pointing this out can serve to take the outrage away from a particular fact situation and explain the reason an action was taken. The same can be said when an employee's actions, though unpopular, clearly comply with regulations, policies or procedures which that employee did not set, but was simply following. While employing this approach may not completely satisfy the ire of those upset with the action, it allows a person/agency to refocus the discontent toward the need for change in the policy or law, and away from the particular factual scenario or participant. It also helps explain to those who do not have a personal stake in the factual scenario why the actions were appropriate based on rules previously set forth and thus helps neutralize making a small situation a larger one.
- c) **Being Proactive and Framing the Issues** – Often times one factual scenario can be seen two or more entirely different ways depending on the role of the participant. For example what might be seen as an unjustified assault on an innocent victim, could also be described as self-defense or defense of others by a police officer. Making certain the issue is framed from your point of view early is a key to alleviating the uphill battle of letting other parties or the media frame your actions first and trying to reframe them from your viewpoint later. As such a proactive approach is critical and part of that is having a plan in place prior to an event actually taking place.
- d) **Re-characterizing the Roles of Victim and Culprit** – This approach often requires the perceived at fault party to do its homework on the front end and learn what it can about the alleged victim. Thorough research will often disclose that the "victim" has an ulterior motive or is not being honest about key factors in the scenario. If this can be demonstrated, both the public and media lack sympathy for those who appear to be trying to pull one over. Proper disclosure of such information enables an entity that may initially be thought of as an at fault actor, to then be seen as the victim of a scam or extortion.
- e) **Making the Smart Choice Going Forward** – Similar to honesty and change, often times an entity is put in a bad or unpopular position for reasons largely outside its own doing. This then leaves the entity at the crossroads of making a bad situation worse or cauterizing the impact by making a clear correct choice going forward. Making the proper choice or path going forward is just as disarming from a public perspective as the use of honesty and change. The action should usually be perceived as voluntary and the correct thing from the part of the actor and not action taken begrudgingly due to some third party.
- f) **When Peace and Quiet is Better for all Parties** – In certain situations no one seemingly gains from publicity. In these scenarios, while no attempt is made to cover up or hide the facts, it may be best that no one affirmatively seeks to address things in public. While regulations may sometimes require some disclosure in government scenarios, often the amount of additional information provided can be voluntarily limited. Privacy for the victim or effected party is a reason that given the right scenario, is understood by the public, even in a world that is looking to fill a twenty-four hour news cycle.

Section IV - The Good (How to do it Right--Responses and Risk Management Initiatives

Quick – Accurate - Consistent

People want to know!

- a) Proactive - Anticipate a Crisis in Your Organization (Risk Assessment; Crisis Management plans; etc)
- b) The “right” person(s) to respond to the media (i.e. Public/Media Relations; Security; etc)
- c) Team meeting – for consistency for key message the organization wants to portray (speak as one voice to avoid the risk of inaccuracy and incompetency).
- d) Consider employee interaction and training when there is a crisis and instruction for any media involvement
- e) Avoid “No Comment” and do not ever ignore the media (someone will love to talk to them!)
- f) Present information quick and accurate (but, speed is meaningless with wrong information) and if information was promised during a crisis, be sure to deliver on the update of the promise
- g) Strategy – If possible, be first to make comment first, prior to media involvement! You control the story.
- h) Communication channels options - Draft News Releases or Web Page Messages
- i) Involve Legal Department or Counsel
- j) Express concern and empathy for any victims involved in crisis (when used correctly- and not always an admission of guilt/responsibility)
- k) Offer post-incident stress/trauma counseling or trauma teams
- l) Conduct post-crisis debrief (what went well; what did not; improvements: plans)