

# Practical Environmental Crisis Communication: Postcrisis Review and Recovery

The first two articles in this series covered the *process* of environmental crisis communication (including using a team structure to ensure that vital tasks are accomplished in a timely manner)<sup>1</sup> and the building of *messages* to convey useful information to both media and nonmedia stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> This final article describes the steps that crisis communicators should take to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts and to identify remaining stakeholder questions and concerns that still need to be addressed.

The main topics we cover include media monitoring (the gathering and analysis of media coverage) and post-crisis stakeholder interviews. We also include a worksheet that crisis communication team members can use as a guide to assess the effectiveness of their crisis communication effort and to document their findings.

At the end of the article we have included a master crisis communication planning checklist covering the entire crisis communication planning process. We saved this comprehensive checklist for

## ***Evaluating and improving crisis communication***

the final article in this series because we wanted readers to consider the totality of planning for, implementing, and evaluating the crisis communication effort.

### **Why Conduct Postcrisis Analysis?**

For facilities that experience them, environmental crises can be technically daunting, and the communication efforts they require can be time-consuming. So once the phone calls from reporters and worried stakeholders have stopped or slowed to a trickle, managers and communication professionals often want to do nothing more than take a deep breath and return to their noncrisis work. There are two reasons why they should resist this urge to simply “move on”:

- Reviewing and analyzing the crisis communication effort is the key to improving crisis communication planning. Those involved in the crisis communication process need to determine what worked, what didn't, and why.

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This will allow them to avoid mistakes and build upon strengths the next time they need to respond to media or stakeholder inquiries.

- Stakeholders may still have questions or concerns about an incident or situation. As discussed in the article on messaging, one of the goals of crisis communication, especially at the local level, is to help stakeholders achieve “closure.” Closure doesn’t mean that stakeholders have forgotten the incident or situation. Rather, it means they are sufficiently satisfied that the crisis has been handled effectively, and the crisis is no longer top-of-mind or an immediate and ongoing source of anxiety.

### **When Is a Crisis Over?**

For purposes of this article, a crisis is considered to be “over” when the media coverage has

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mostly stopped (except for a few follow-up stories). Even after media interest subsides, however, local stakeholders may still have questions and concerns. Cleanups, repairs, and investigations may still be under way. In

cases involving widespread ecological damage or discovery of serious contamination, the work may continue for months or even years. Communicators will no doubt need to provide updates to stakeholders about such work.

Thus, although a crisis may be “over” in terms of media coverage or immediate demands for information, follow-up communication can still be required.

### **Stories About a Crisis Can Re-Emerge**

Readers should understand that stories about an environmental crisis that is “over” may re-emerge later—especially if the same facility or organization has another incident, a neighboring

facility has an incident, or high-profile stories about the same chemicals or the same industry involved in the earlier incident surface elsewhere. Often, news stories will simply recap coverage of the past incident. In some cases, however, the past incident may be used by one or more media outlets to suggest a trend in chemical risk or industry safety problems.

In cases where an incident occurs at the same facility as an earlier crisis, coverage may veer into storylines that question how the facility is managed and whether the crises indicate a serious flaw, either in the design or operation of the facility or in the abilities of its managers.

When stories about a crisis are reprised in the news, or re-emerge in public dialogues, managers should consider mobilizing the facility’s or organization’s crisis communication team so it can respond to inquiries from reporters and non-media stakeholders.

### **Media Monitoring: Why It’s Important**

Media monitoring should be initiated as soon as possible after an environmental crisis occurs, especially if the crisis is significant or major. But additional analysis of media coverage should be undertaken as part of the postcrisis review as well.

Reviewing media coverage is vital to identifying erroneous information or dangerous trends in reporting on a story (e.g., portraying an incident as part of a much larger pattern of mismanagement or criminal behavior). Communicators should attempt to correct erroneous information, either in real time (as the coverage continues) or later (after the crisis has passed).<sup>3</sup>

Correcting erroneous media coverage has taken on new importance in the digital age. Before the widespread availability of the Internet, local stories, in particular, tended to disappear into the relative inaccessibility of microfilm archives. Now, however, stories in small local newspapers, in the trade press, and even blog entries

can be almost as easy to find as stories published in major newspapers. Transcripts (as well as imbedded video and audio) of news broadcasts can also be found on the Internet by just about anyone who bothers to search for them.

In cases where only one or two stories are published or aired (a minor crisis), erroneous information that slips into the coverage cannot be corrected in subsequent stories. Even though such incidents or situations may be minor, communicators should correct misinformation with local stakeholders. In addition, they should consider correcting it in the newspaper that printed it by submitting letters to the editor or guest editorials, or by purchasing a display advertisement, so that the correction becomes part of the digital record.

Communicators can no longer assume that a crisis will eventually fade into the woodwork, never to surface again. To ensure that Internet searchers have access to the organization's side as well as the news coverage, some organizations have begun posting summaries about incidents or situations on their websites to provide overviews of their actions and their responses to conflicts or controversies that arose during crises. We anticipate that this practice will become commonplace.

### **What Does Media Monitoring Involve?**

Many large or extremely visible organizations already perform—or have vendors who perform—monitoring of “mentions” in the media and/or on Internet blogs of the organization's name and other industry-associated news. (With the growth of social media, such monitoring should also include tracking of services such as Twitter and Facebook.) During a crisis, organizations that don't routinely perform media monitoring usually hire media monitoring vendors to deliver copies of newspaper stories, tapes of broadcasts, and Internet stories about the crisis to the persons who are handling the crisis communication.

In the past, newspaper clippings and tapes of news broadcasts typically were delivered overnight. But the shortening of the news cycle and the ease of electronic transmission has stepped up the pace. Clients can expect to receive copies of news reports from broadcast, print, and online sources within minutes (or at least hours) of their release.

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### **Media Monitoring at the Local Level**

During significant or serious crises, organizations will definitely want to engage the services of a media monitoring vendor to gather all coverage—local, regional, national, and even international, if such coverage occurs. But members of the organization's crisis communication team also should follow the local media coverage themselves. They often do so by assigning team members or other support staff responsibility for collecting stories and comments from local outlets.

Local media coverage often has subtleties and twists to it that are especially or uniquely meaningful to area residents—and these can place very specific demands for information on the crisis communication team.

Many small or suburban communities still have weekly or biweekly community newspapers. Given their long publication cycles, these newspapers aren't viewed as sources of “breaking news,” but they often are considered authoritative because they offer complete stories that

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are covered from the local angle. In addition, a growing number of areas are now served by “hyperlocal” news sources, such as Patch.com, which publishes online-only coverage aimed at individual communities.

In many communities, local newspapers are still widely read for community news—and for letters to the editor. Most of these papers are now available online, often with “community forum” sections that allow virtually unlimited electronic posts of additional letters to the editor, or comments on letters that are published in paper format. These electronic forums frequently are dominated by especially opinionated readers,

and are not necessarily indicative of all stakeholder viewpoints. Nonetheless, they can provide insights into stakeholder questions and concerns.

Some communities also have local radio stations that serve

their areas. Not all of these stations broadcast formal news. However, some local stations broadcast call-in shows that can highlight questions, concerns, and comments that residents have about environmental incidents or situations.

### **How to Review News Stories**

As discussed in the article on messaging, if a serious environmental incident has occurred, you should expect news coverage to be hard-hitting—and often sensational. Inevitably, almost all the coverage will be “bad” news to some degree.

Beyond “bad” news, though, what *do* communicators need to look for? First, crisis communication team members will want to look for evidence that their crisis communication approach is effective. Evidence of effective communication includes accurate reporting of the

facts and the inclusion of the organization’s key messages, as well as the inclusion of themes (repeated statements or descriptions) that depict the organization as competent, credible, responsible, involved, concerned, and responsive.

Conversely, if the team finds that important facts are wrongly reported or missing, key messages are absent, and the themes reported by multiple media outlets focus on issues such as blame, incompetence, unresponsiveness, and sloppy operations, this indicates serious problems with the crisis communication effort.

Another troubling theme that can emerge involves rehashing of past mistakes. In such cases, the media may cast all stories as part of a known or perceived industry problem, or report them in the context of a major incident that happened years earlier, whether it is connected with the current situation or not. Although past incidents often are mentioned in news coverage—especially at the beginning of a crisis, when reporters are initially getting a handle on the organization involved and the incident or situation that has occurred—effective crisis communication efforts should be able to decouple past events from the current crisis as coverage continues.

If a crisis is being framed within largely negative contexts by multiple media outlets, the crisis communication team may need to change its approach to working with the media. However, in cases where only one or two media outlets are framing their stories with negative themes, the problem may lie with individual reporters or editorial personnel who are allowing their biases to color the news coverage.

### **Elements of Coverage Reviewed as Part of Media Monitoring**

In addition to overall themes, crisis communication and media relations professionals should review the following seven elements of news coverage (we were initially introduced to these

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elements by Penny T. Hill of Communications Strategies in Sacramento, California, with whom we have prepared crisis communication plans for private-sector clients):

- facts,
- key messages,
- visibility,
- frequency,
- length,
- objectivity and tone, and
- sources of information.

In the sections that follow, we discuss these elements in more detail. For each element or set of elements, we include “danger signs” to look out for—that is, signs that indicate problems with the crisis communication effort.

### ***Facts and Key Messages***

Facts are the “who-what-where” pieces of information that describe an incident or situation: How many gallons of oil were spilled? How many people were evacuated? You may not like the facts, but it is better for reporters to get them right than to have erroneous information included in media coverage.

Key messages are the statements that communicators use to add context to facts and to reassure the public of the organization’s competence and commitment to respond. Key messages may state an organization’s policies, describe or explain the likely impact of a situation, or declare the organization’s intent to respond to the crisis. Key messages include statements such as “We don’t believe that any spill is acceptable,” “We are bringing in cleanup contractors who will restore the ecological health of the creek,” or “The spill did not affect the town’s public water supply wells.” Key messages are often followed by points that provide backup or additional explanation.

Ideally, communicators want reporters to pick up and use the key messages that the organization’s spokesperson is communicating. Since the spokesperson is including these messages in his or her statements (and they are also repeated in news releases), communicators should expect them to be included, at least in part, in objective news coverage.

If the key messages are largely absent from the news stories of several media outlets, it may indicate that the messages are viewed as self-serving or untruthful, or that the spokesperson may not be seen as credible. In such cases, crisis communication team members need to consider revising or changing the key messages and/or using a different spokesperson.

Danger signs with respect to facts and key messages:

- Errors of fact or misinformation that continues to appear in news coverage.
- Absence of key messages or use of key messages in rebuttals against the organization (e.g., “They say that they are committed to environmental protection, but state environmental protection agency records reveal that they have had 19 spills of over 50 gallons into Flint Creek in the past 10 years”).

### ***Visibility, Frequency, and Length***

The visibility of stories, the frequency of broadcast mentions (and the number of print stories published by a media outlet), and the length of broadcast or print stories are all indicators of how serious media outlets consider the crisis to be. The public also often takes its cues regarding the seriousness of an incident or situation based on the amount of coverage they see devoted to it.

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Visibility has to do with where (within a publication, website, or news broadcast) a story appears. Front-page stories are obviously more visible than stories buried in the back of the newspaper or mentioned far down on a website. In addition, stories that are “below the fold” of newspapers (meaning on the bottom half of the page) are also considered less visible and less likely to be read.

Team members who are performing media monitoring will want to note where stories appear as part of their analysis of media coverage. The typical progression of crisis news is for the initial coverage to be the most visible (e.g., on the

front page or near the front of the newspaper or top of the website). Follow-up stories generally become shorter and tend to be featured less prominently, meaning they move into the inside pages of the newspaper or down from the top of a webpage.

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Visibility in broadcast news is a bit different from print or electronic media. Broadcast news reports tend to include only important stories, or stories with good visual impact, such as fires (even if they aren’t major but look impressive). Visibility in broadcast news is measured primarily by where, in the order of the newscast, the story is aired: Does it lead the newscast? Does it appear in the first three minutes? Five minutes? Less important news stories are aired later in the broadcast, and stakeholders who tune in for “top-of-the-hour” news may miss them. Because broadcast news programs generally have limited airtime, follow-up stories drop out of the lineup very quickly. This means that communicators have a very short window for

correcting misinformation through broadcast media.

Frequency applies primarily to broadcast media. Is a story about a crisis run repeatedly through the day and for several days or weeks? If so, expect that many people will have seen it. Moreover, frequent repetition can amplify the public’s perception of how serious the crisis is. Frequency (and the extra concern that it can generate among the public) can also be an issue with print and electronic media when a story and its updates dominate the front page for days or weeks.

Length of stories applies primarily to print or electronic media. News editors generally devote long stories only to incidents or situations they view as important. Standards of objective reporting suggest that long stories should include quotes and information from the organization involved in the crisis. However, long stories will also typically contain quotes from persons who are critical of and/or worried about the incident or situation, along with additional information reporters have gleaned about science, health and safety, and environmental protection. Reporters are not usually scientists or environmental, health, and safety professionals. Thus, longer news stories can increase the likelihood that they may introduce misinformation into the coverage.

Danger signs with respect to visibility, frequency, and length:

- Long, highly visible news stories that dominate the news and that are out of proportion to the magnitude of the crisis; frequent, top-of-the-hour stories about the crisis aired by broadcast media.
- Long, highly visible stories run after the crisis incident or situation is winding down, when other media outlets have scaled back or ceased their coverage.
- Stories about other issues that prominently mention the crisis incident or situation, pre-

sent the crisis as a “trend” or the “tip of the iceberg,” and keep the crisis in front of the public.

- Large numbers of “hits” on videos of the crisis (amateur or professional) on social media sites such as YouTube.

### ***Objectivity and Tone***

As already discussed, crisis news should be viewed within the context of “bad news,” and crisis communication team members must avoid viewing negative coverage as a personal insult or attack. Instead, team members should look first at the objectivity of the reporting: Are the facts correct? Are the organization’s messages or quotes from the organizational spokesperson included in the story?

The other half of the objectivity equation involves the tone of coverage. This has to do with word choices and other somewhat elusive factors, such as the order in which information is given, how quotes are juxtaposed, and the like. Team members should try to determine whether, for instance, the tone of a story gives the impression that the reporter believes the organization’s management has acted (or is acting) poorly, is incompetent, or is deliberately ignoring or discounting an issue of importance.

Tone is a difficult element to assess, since it is often in the eye (or ear) of the beholder—and it is especially difficult if the beholder works for the organization involved in the crisis. Also, unless the tone of a news story is drippingly sarcastic, attacking, and sustained, or a story with “tone” problems also includes serious factual mistakes, attempting to discuss the issue with the media outlet’s editors is unlikely to remedy the problem.

Danger signs with respect to objectivity and tone:

- Misinformation continues after the crisis communication team has provided clarifica-

tion or additional, supporting information to reporters.

- An attacking tone continues in the coverage from a media outlet.
- The organization’s quotes or key messages are absent from coverage; treatment of organizational quotes or key messages (e.g., juxtaposition of critical comments) suggests ridicule toward them.

### ***Sources of Information***

Reporters are trained to seek out multiple sources when they are building their stories—including, whenever possible, sources who possess opposing views. The inclusion of opposing views is intended to provide balance and objectivity to news stories, to avoid parroting one side’s version of the story or presenting only one side of an issue.

Moreover, the inclusion of multiple viewpoints provides readers or viewers with a better understanding of the impact (or perceived or possible impact) that a crisis has had on people who live in the community. Readers and viewers have an interest in how an incident has affected others in the community—and they want to see or hear them quoted in news stories.

Thus, it is unrealistic for crisis communication team members to expect that the only statements included in a story will come from their spokesperson or others supportive of their organization. But it can signal trouble when reporters rely heavily on individuals who are known to be opposed to the organization or facility, while including little or no information provided by the crisis communication team.

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In addition, problems can arise when reporters feature the views of people who are passionate about a particular environmental incident or issue but who have little or no firsthand knowledge of the incident and/or little or no relevant technical or scientific training. Although such persons may possess some knowledge, they should not be presented as “experts.”

Reliance on dubious sources of scientific information should also raise red flags and may signal a significant problem with the credibility of the

sources that reporters are using to build their stories. Responsible reporters seek information from sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

Danger signs with respect to information sources:

- News coverage fails to include the organization’s comments, messages, or information, while favoring information from adversarial or less authoritative persons or groups.

### **Dealing With “Unfair” Coverage**

The first course of action crisis communicators should take in cases where news coverage is inaccurate or otherwise off the mark is to reach out to reporters with additional information and offer to answer questions. In many cases, this can solve at least some of the problems with inaccurate reporting. As discussed in the previous article on messaging, poor reporting is often caused by poor, incomplete, or late communication on the part of crisis communicators. As a result, crisis communicators can often improve the quality of reporting by improving the quality

and timeliness of their own communication with the media.

Most editors and other media outlet managers are extremely resistant to attempts to influence the stories they run or how those stories are reported. Of the seven coverage elements discussed earlier, realistically there are only two that crisis communicators are likely to have any chance of addressing successfully with senior editors: facts and (on occasion) sources of information. In both cases, the errors typically need to be egregious for senior editors to take corrective action.

If you meet with senior editors or other media outlet managers, pick a handful of major examples where you can prove that the facts reported are wrong or the sources of information used are definitely not authoritative (and identify other authoritative information that clearly contradicts what was included in the news story). You should also be able to state that you have attempted to provide correct facts and authoritative sources of information to the media outlet’s reporters.

If you approach the meeting from the “we need to make sure the public is getting the best information possible” angle, you are more likely to be successful in ensuring that subsequent reporting will be balanced and accurate than if you appear to be attacking the integrity of the media outlet or its reporters.

### **Postcrisis Stakeholder Interviews**

Facility managers may be reluctant to reach out to local stakeholders after the news coverage about a crisis has concluded. However, achieving closure often requires follow-up communication. And follow-up communication can only be effective if communicators are aware of the questions and concerns that stakeholders have.

Postcrisis interviews help communicators identify outstanding questions and concerns. Moreover, in our experience, stakeholders almost always view organizations in a more positive light



when they take the time to conduct such interviews. Just as stakeholders appreciate receiving prompt, accurate information regarding a crisis—even though much of this information is “bad” news—they also appreciate an organization’s efforts to talk with them and to provide useful follow-up information.

The goal of postcrisis stakeholder interviews is to answer two main questions:

- Do stakeholders have questions or concerns that need to be addressed in order to achieve closure regarding the incident or situation?
- How well do stakeholders think the organization handled the crisis response (including the crisis communication aspect)?

Answers to these two questions often are intertwined, since misunderstandings about technical aspects of the crisis response generally arise from insufficient or confusing information. For example, community residents may believe that oil spilled into a nearby creek was “just allowed to flow down into the river,” when in fact the majority of the oil was contained and removed from the creek before it entered the river.

Communicators will want to correct major misunderstandings such as this and determine whether vital facts were omitted from news releases or from comments given during media briefings. If the appropriate information did make it into the media coverage, then communicators will want to understand why community residents apparently don’t believe that adequate cleanup has taken place. Some possible causes include rumors put forth by seemingly credible parties; extreme sensitivity on the part of community members to ecosystem damage; and past spills that were not cleaned up, despite assurances from those responsible that cleanups had been completed.

The follow-up process involves conducting interviews with a cross-section of stakeholders in the facility’s community (e.g., local officials, neighbors, and representatives of community or local environmental advocacy groups).<sup>4</sup> The interviews may take place in person or via telephone, depending on the preference of the stakeholders and their availability.

### **Generic Questions for Postcrisis Stakeholder Interviews**

Following is a list of interview questions that can be used in postcrisis assessments:

- What do you know about the incident?
- Do you have any questions about what happened, including how the incident or situation was handled or what effects it might have had?
- How well do you think the media covered the story?
- Do you think the facility/organization did a good job of informing people in the community about what was going on?
- Do you have any remaining concerns about the incident or situation? Is there other information you would like to have, either about the incident or situation or about our operations?
- What do other people with whom you are acquainted know about this incident or situation? Do you know of any concerns or questions they have about what happened?
- What else have you heard from other people about the incident or about the facility/organization?

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- Do you have any suggestions for us regarding our communication? Do we need to provide more information to people now? Do you have suggestions about how we should do that? (E.g., meetings with presentations and/or discussion, information posted on website or mailed to homes?)
- What expectations do people in this community have of organizations such as ours? Is there anything we should consider doing to ensure that we continue to be welcome in this community?

### **Other Issues May Be Uncovered Postcrisis**

Crisis communication team members who are involved in reviewing media coverage and conducting postcrisis interviews with stakeholders often uncover important information about other issues involving the facility or its operations. Even though these findings may not relate to the effectiveness of the crisis communication effort, it is important to address them since their existence can have a significant impact on the facility's or the organization's long-term relationship with stakeholders.

In some cases, these issues must be dealt with head-on. In others, organization managers and crisis communication team members should simply keep an eye on them and understand that their organization's status or place within the community may have changed as a result of fallout from the crisis—or issues that were in play before the crisis ever occurred.

### **Stakeholder Expectations**

It is important to identify stakeholder expectations in the aftermath of an environmental

crisis. Understanding these expectations can help prevent bitterness—and potentially head off lawsuits by neighbors and others who believe they are owed something as a result of the crisis.

Expectations may be based on general comments made by communicators during the crisis communication effort (e.g., “If our neighbors' properties have been damaged, we will reimburse them for the damage”). They may also arise from comments made by others, such as local environmental or community advocates or politicians (e.g., “If the contamination traveled off-site, Organization XYZ had better replace the soil in people's lawns”). Or they may be based on precedents set during similar incidents in the same community or elsewhere (e.g., “When ABC Company blew dust all over people's cars and houses, they paid to clean it up”).

If residents believe their property has been damaged by contamination from an accidental release, it may be necessary to collect and analyze samples from the properties in question. The organization may also need to enlist state environmental and/or public health agency staff to confirm the analytical results in order to assure residents and other stakeholders that the organization's decisions are based on scientific evidence and that the organization has acted in good faith.

Resetting expectations can be difficult—and sometimes unpleasant—work. But failing to do so will pretty much guarantee that, at least for the affected parties, there will be no closure.

### **Material, Lasting, and/or Visible Effects**

When an incident has had material, lasting, or visible effects, communicators will need to continue with their outreach to local stakeholders and make sure that lines of communication remain open until the incident or situation has been dealt with completely. Examples of such effects include visible damage to the facility, nearby

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buildings, or natural areas (such as creeks); degradation of drinking water from private or public sources; and warnings that residents should not consume vegetables from home gardens that may have been exposed to a chemical release.

In cases involving widespread ecological damage, the organization should be careful not to abruptly withdraw support and assistance once media interest in the incident fades. Especially when an incident creates widespread economic damage and hardship on some community residents, the withdrawal of high-profile managers and assistance programs can lead to considerable protest on the part of persons and groups who are still struggling with the aftermath of the crisis. In addition to generating widespread anger among community residents and officials, it can also lead to less-than-flattering follow-up stories that can damage the reputation of the organization.

### **Long-Standing (but Previously Unrecognized) Concerns and Attitudes of Key Local Stakeholders**

A crisis can reveal that local stakeholders have concerns or attitudes the organization's managers did not know about—even though it may become obvious, based on the stakeholders' statements, that these beliefs are longstanding. For example, after a minor fire at a facility, the local newspaper may run quotes from neighbors saying, "We always knew that place could blow up and kill us at any time." It may turn out that local officials also hold such beliefs, even though they have never stated them to the organization's managers.

Communicators should view revelations of erroneous beliefs as gifts. Management will now know what concerns stakeholders have and can perform the outreach necessary to address the issues before they surface in the form of opposition to permit renewals or facility expansions.

### **Previously Hidden Adversaries**

A crisis incident or situation can bring out adversaries that facility or organization managers never knew they had. Community groups that have voiced concern about the environment or other businesses—but who haven't spoken out against your facility—may decide to use the crisis as an opportunity to recruit members, gain political capital, or draw a target on your organization. An elected official who in the past has been relatively courteous may reveal that he or she "would like to get rid of old, dirty industry." Commercial and industrial neighbors who have long been bothered by your facility's operations may finally voice their concerns in response to a crisis.

Although the un-cloaking of adversaries may be disturbing, organization managers are better off knowing that such adversaries exist so they can attempt to establish dialogues with the parties in question to resolve troublesome issues.

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### **Previously Hidden Allies**

In some situations, a crisis may reveal parties or persons who are surprisingly supportive. This is most common in cases where an organization has done a good job responding to the crisis and reaching out to local stakeholders, both before and during the incident or the emergence of a situation. Persons or groups who are most likely to emerge as allies include residential, commercial, or industrial neighbors with whom the organization has built a good dialogue.

On occasion, local environmental advocacy groups may also provide support. Environmental advocacy groups most often speak out in cases where group members are well acquainted with

the facility or organization; are aware of the facility's environmental, health, and safety programs; and can see, based on their own members' expertise, that facility management is taking prompt action to minimize the effects of a chemical release, fire, or other incident.

### **Crisis Transformed Into Symbol**

It is not uncommon for environmental crises to be used for political gain by individuals seeking public office or by various groups trying to push their environmental views. In some cases, however, the politicization can go further, with the crisis taking on what amounts to symbolic significance.

Fortunately, such scenarios are not common. But when a crisis does become intertwined with a much larger issue, trying to separate fact from fiction is extremely difficult.

An example of this would be when an incident at a facility galvanizes already strong feelings about the direction in which a community is developing (e.g., manufacturing/industry versus office/professional space). In such a case, the crisis can become a rallying cry for the anti-manufacturing, pro-professional space development faction. They can use it to demonstrate the ineptitude of current, pro-manufacturing officials and influence the future direction of ordinances, land use, and zoning.

In this scenario, the issue becomes much larger than the actual environmental crisis. But the crisis itself may continue to be the public "face" of the controversy within the community. So the crisis is kept before the public, and its constant mention can magnify the severity of

the event in the eyes of the community, making meaningful closure extremely difficult to achieve. In addition, if the political fight appended to the crisis is particularly bitter, the public may come to associate that bitterness, as well as the attendant upheaval and fighting, with the organization or facility where the crisis occurred.

### **Working With Emergency Responders**

Sometimes news coverage about a crisis or comments made in follow-up interviews reveal that stakeholders have concerns about how the local emergency responders (e.g., fire and police departments) handled the incident. For example, after a fire or the release of hazardous materials to the air, land, or water, residential neighbors may be particularly concerned about how they were—or were not—notification, advised to evacuate, told to shelter-in-place, and the like.

These issues are not really within the facility's control since it is up to the local emergency responders to decide whether evacuations are called for, where people should go, and so forth. But criticism of emergency responders will likely stick to the facility or organization, too. This can create problems for facility and organization managers, who will want to be able to assure local stakeholders that they are safe. For this reason, managers should consider approaching the local responder organizations and suggesting that efforts be undertaken to review facility and community response plans and to communicate about them with neighbors and other concerned stakeholders.

In many cases, local emergency responders will already have met with facility management to review the crisis response, or will have set up a date to do so. However, some local emergency responders may be reluctant to address questions or concerns raised by residents. Such cases are among the rare instances in which we recommend that organizations turn to the mayor or

**Managers should consider approaching the local responder organizations and suggesting that efforts be undertaken to review facility and community response plans and to communicate about them with neighbors and other concerned stakeholders.**

**Exhibit 1. Postcrisis Review Worksheet**

**Media Response**

Overall, how well did organization personnel work with the media? Describe. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

In general, were responses to reporters' requests for information handled in a timely manner? (Yes/No)

If yes, describe how the crisis communication team responded in a timely manner (e.g., was background information on the facility or project readily available? Did the review and approval process for news releases go smoothly?).

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

If no, describe what prevented the team from responding as quickly as it probably should have.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Did a facility or organization spokesperson perform a "first contact" briefing? (Yes/No)

If not, explain why this wasn't done (e.g., first news release was available for distribution before media calls began, so the "first contact" was more comprehensive than the model described in the previous article; spokesperson was unavailable to give briefing; spokesperson preferred to wait until he or she had received more information or instruction\*).

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Was the first news release issued in a timely fashion? (Yes/No)

If not, what factors led to delays (e.g., obtaining information, physically preparing/revising the statement, obtaining approval, media inquiries not forwarded to crisis team in a timely fashion)? Explain.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Were calls from media representatives logged and forwarded to the crisis communication team in a timely manner? (Yes/No)

If not, please explain why (e.g., confusion about who was supposed to log calls/convey information to other team members; shift changes involving crisis communication team).

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please list the key messages that you attempted to communicate to the media. (Note: if you didn't develop formal key messages, list the messages you did deliver.)

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\_\_\_\_\_

Were these messages picked up by the media? (Yes/No)

If yes, describe how they were used in news stories.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Were any of the key messages the team attempted to communicate ignored by the media or changed in an unflattering way (e.g., "The facility manager's statement that the facility has a good environmental record is belied by residents' reports of frequent spills befouling the ditch along the parkway going back several decades")? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\*If this was the case, then crisis communication team members need to review the article entitled "Practical Environmental Crisis Communication: Messaging" (in the spring 2012 issue of this journal), which offers a model for "first contact" briefings. The first contact is vital to establishing that the facility or organization will be responding and to get that fact into news reports.

*(continued)*

**Exhibit 1. Postcrisis Review Worksheet** *(continued)*

If crisis communication team members were told, either by reporters or in the opinions of other persons, such as local officials, why these messages failed to be communicated by the media, what did they say (e.g., too complex and/or technical; reporters considered the message to be self-serving or untruthful; suspected media bias/quotes from other, adversarial parties were dominating the media coverage)? Explain.

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Were there logistical problems, scheduling problems, or communication problems in setting up media briefings (e.g., difficulties finding an appropriate location, responding to deadlines, or ensuring that all reporters were notified about the briefings in time to attend)? (Yes/No)

If yes, what were they? What could be done better next time?

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Was there any perceptible bias in reporting, such as failure to include the organization's information in news stories or preferences for certain sources, especially nonauthoritative or unduly adversarial sources? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe.

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Did this apparent bias affect the coverage of the incident or situation? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe.

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Did the media coverage include significant erroneous information (e.g., regarding actual risk or actual effects, not such details as misspelled names)? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe the erroneous information.

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**Responding to Nonmedia Stakeholders**

Did you reach out to key officials or others (e.g., mayor, president of nearby homeowners association) at the beginning of the crisis to give them a "heads up" on the unfolding situation? (Yes/No)

If no, why not? Explain.

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How did elected and staff officials or other opinion leaders respond to your crisis communication efforts? Were they supportive, condemning, or noncommittal when they were interviewed by the media or in statements to other local stakeholders? Describe.

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During the crisis, what comments were made by neighbors, residents, or other local stakeholders? Did these statements appear in media coverage or were they heard via other means (e.g., calls to the facility or organization, comments heard by facility employees)? Please describe these comments.

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Did the crisis reveal concerns (valid or not) that local officials had about the facility or organization that management hadn't known about (e.g., minor fire at facility led to comments about neighbors' concerns that "the place could blow up at any time" or "toxic chemicals from there could kill us in an instant if they'd been released")? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe.

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**Exhibit 1. Postcrisis Review Worksheet** *(continued)*

Did the crisis reveal adversaries that the facility or organization didn't realize that it had? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe.

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Did the crisis reveal allies that you didn't know were there? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe.

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Did the crisis communication effort omit—or only belatedly provide information to—any stakeholder groups? (Yes/No)

If yes, please explain.

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**Other Findings Regarding Crisis**

Did the crisis become politicized in some manner? (Yes/No)

If yes, please explain.

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Is the incident or situation going to have material, lasting effects? (Yes/No)

If yes, please explain.

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Do stakeholders have concerns that may require communicators to work with other organizations (e.g., local emergency responders) to address? (Yes/No)

If yes, please explain.

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Does the crisis appear to have been woven into other controversial issues that are likely to keep it in the news as these other issues play out? (Yes/No)

If yes, please explain.

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**Postcrisis Interviews**

What questions or concerns about the crisis or about the facility or organization did stakeholders reveal during follow-up interviews? List them.

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Did the follow-up interviews reveal any expectations that stakeholders have of the facility or organization? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe.

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*(continued)*

**Exhibit 1. Postcrisis Review Worksheet** *(continued)*

What comments did stakeholders make regarding their views of how the crisis—and the crisis communication—was handled?

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Did stakeholders indicate that they found some information communicated by the organization during the crisis to be lacking or poorly stated?

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Did stakeholders offer praise or single out any element of the crisis communication response as having been particularly useful or well done? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe.

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Did stakeholders make any suggestions about how the crisis communication should have been handled? List suggestions.

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Did stakeholders criticize the way other parties responded to the crisis (e.g., media, emergency responders, local officials)? (Yes/No)

If yes, describe what they said.

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Did stakeholders praise the way other parties responded to the crisis? (Yes/No)

If yes, describe what they said.

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Have certain stakeholders failed to reach “closure” with the crisis? (Yes/No)

If yes, then list the stakeholders and the reasons why the crisis remains an immediate concern to them.

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If certain stakeholders are still seriously and immediately concerned about the incident or situation, what suggestions do you have to address their concerns and achieve closure (e.g., additional information, touring the facility and discussing the operation with organization management, state environmental agency personnel, or other “experts”)? Describe.

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How do you propose to correct misinformation (e.g., meetings with local officials and interested stakeholders, publication and distribution of fact sheets, public meetings)?

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## Exhibit 2. Master Crisis Communication Planning Checklist

- Have you performed a vulnerability assessment to determine what might go wrong?** Examples include: spills; fires; transportation accidents; workplace violence; sexual harassment; product formulation mishaps/product tampering; discovery of contamination; revelations regarding health/environmental effects of chemicals (real or alleged); misdeeds by employees; misdeeds by management; financial problems/layoffs/plant closings; terrorism/suspected or attempted terrorism; other crimes committed on company property or using company resources or products.
- Have you determined where, within the organization, such crisis communication should be handled?** **Note: We are looking here not only at the severity of the issue, but at public expectations of where, within the organization, the communication should be coming from.** E.g., most facility-based issues will probably be handled by facility management with headquarters support; issues that could affect the organization as a whole, that are extremely sensitive (such as attempted terrorism), or that call into question the abilities of facility management (such as sexual harassment claims) should, in most cases, be led by headquarters management, with supplementary communication, as appropriate, from the facility level.
- Do you have criteria for ranking the severity/potential severity of a situation so that an appropriate response is mounted?**
- Do you have a formal crisis communication plan?**
- Do you have a mechanism in place to ensure that notification about the crisis is passed “up the line” to senior management so they will not be blindsided? Do you also have a mechanism in place to ensure that others (e.g., sales reps who may get calls from customers, managers of “sister” facilities) are notified?**
- Who has to approve statements or news releases? Is it possible to get approvals in a timely fashion? Do you have procedures in place to route statements to those who need to review and approve them?**
- Do you have a designated spokesperson and sufficient backup spokespersons so that someone will be available to fulfill this function?**
- Are your spokespersons and backup spokespersons trained to speak with the media? Is this training updated on a regular basis?**
- Do you have a formal crisis communication team set up?** **Note:** Crisis communication is very labor-intensive. You need to have people available to handle all of the functions.
- Do your employees know that they should not be making statements to the media? Do they know where to direct inquiries if they receive them?**
- Do you have a procedure for logging inquiries from the media so that calls are returned in a timely fashion?**
- Do you have a procedure for logging inquiries from other stakeholders (including customers) so that calls can be returned or information provided when it is available?**
- Do you have a current list of all of the local media outlets (broadcast, print, web-based) with their newsroom phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and/or fax numbers?**
- If you have a Community Advisory Panel (CAP), do you have an arrangement to contact the members in the event of a crisis?** **Note:** You DO NOT want to ask CAP members to speak for your facility.
- Are there other stakeholders within your community (e.g., mayor, city council persons for your area, homeowners association president, other nonemergency personnel) who would expect or need to be notified in the event of a crisis? Do you have a list of those people and a way to contact them (e.g., phone numbers, e-mail)?**
- Do you have plans, policies, or ideas regarding how you might be able to assist people who have been affected by a crisis involving your organization or facility?** E.g., if neighbors have been evacuated from their homes because of an incident, will the organization pay for them to stay in motels and/or pay for meals and other incidentals while they are displaced? If some neighbors are not in a position to pay for lodging or meals out of their own pockets and then wait to be reimbursed, does the organization have an arrangement in place to pay directly for their needs? This is an important consideration in some lower-income areas. (**Note:** What is appropriate will vary from situation to situation. However, it is useful to have thought through some options for providing assistance QUICKLY if assistance is needed.)
- Do you have background information, such as fact sheets or other such documents (including documents available electronically) that you can give or send via fax or e-mail to reporters or direct them to on the Internet in order to help them better understand your organization or facility?**
- Do you have arrangements with outside consultants to provide crisis communication assistance during a crisis? Will your organization’s headquarters provide this assistance to facilities, if necessary?**
- Do you have arrangements for media monitoring?** E.g., a service or, when dealing with coverage at the local level, agreements among your management staff to review broadcast, print, and electronic coverage of the incident or situation.
- Do you perform follow-up interviews of local, non-CAP stakeholders to determine how well you did with your crisis communication effort, either after the incident or situation is “over” or (if the incident or situation is of long duration) after key steps in the crisis response process or after significant public outcry or controversy?** **Note:** CAP members are typically better informed about a facility than other stakeholders, so they are not necessarily good gauges of whether concerns or questions exist in the larger community.
- Do you perform follow-up outreach to correct mistaken information or to reach out to people who might have questions or concerns? Do you have a formal “community outreach recovery plan”?**
- Do you have a formal process within your organization for reviewing what happened in the crisis communication process and determining what went right, what went wrong, and what might need to be changed?**

some other highly placed official or opinion leader for help.

Facility management should suggest that outreach efforts be undertaken to address residents' concerns. With the help of local officials or opinion leaders, they should also prevail upon emergency responders to communicate more effectively with the public. Emergency responders should be asked to explain what they want and need neighbors, residents, and others to know or do in the event of a future incident.

### Worksheet and Checklist

**Exhibit 1** shows a worksheet that crisis communication team members can use as a guide to assess the effectiveness of their crisis communication effort and to document their findings.

**Exhibit 2** shows a master crisis communication planning checklist covering the entire crisis communication process. It encompasses all the topics covered in this three-part series, including planning for, implementing, and evaluating the crisis communication effort.

### Conclusion

Nobody wants an environmental crisis to occur on their watch. But even well-managed facilities can experience incidents and situations that draw public scrutiny.

The way in which a facility or organization responds to a crisis can affect how it is viewed by the community for years to come. The media and other stakeholders will scrutinize not only how the organization handles the technical aspects of the crisis, but also how well it communicates with

stakeholders. In fact, poor crisis communication can sometimes create more public anger toward an organization than the actual crisis itself.

Once an environmental crisis is under control and is no longer an active and immediate news story, the organization's crisis communications team should carry out postcrisis review and analysis. When conducted appropriately, such review will allow crisis communicators to learn how effective their communication efforts have been—and what they can do to improve their performance in the future.

Follow-up interviews with stakeholders (and subsequent outreach work) can frequently resolve outstanding concerns and issues. A thorough and thoughtful response to community concerns can increase the standing of the facility or organization among its stakeholders and in its community.

In addition, crises and their aftermath can reveal fault lines that facility or organization managers never knew existed in their communities. Again, good follow-up work can often head off or mitigate newly revealed problems.

### Notes

1. Forrest, C. J. (2011, Winter). Practical environmental crisis communication: Process and procedures. *Environmental Quality Management*, 21(2), 1–12.
2. Forrest, C. J. (2012, Spring). Practical environmental crisis communication: Messaging. *Environmental Quality Management*, 21(3), 1–19.
3. This article does not discuss the issue of rehabilitating an organization's image at the national level.
4. Other nonlocal stakeholders, such as customers or state or national advocacy groups, may also be interviewed to determine if they require specific follow-up communication, as well.

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