

A Tale of Two Crises

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Environmental crises can befall virtually any organization. Since the manner in which an organization deals with a crisis—including the effectiveness of its communication effort—may be scrutinized as closely as the incident or situation itself, managers with environmental responsibilities would be well-served to gain an understanding of crisis communication. This article explores two cases involving environmental crises and the communication surrounding them. Analyses of these two crises, along with a discussion of key concepts of crisis communication, provide valuable insights into working with the media and other important stakeholders to minimize public concerns and increase the likelihood of objective news coverage.

Crisis involving environmental issues come in many shapes and forms, affecting organizations of virtually any size in both public and private sectors. Environmental crises may arise from immediate and obvious causes such as fires, spills, or explosions, or they may involve misuse of a company's product by a third party, discovery or suspicion of contamination, or announcements of enforcement actions. Each crisis is highly individual but, as this article discusses, all can benefit from the application of certain key concepts. This article explores communication responses to two crises: one involving a chemical release and a second involving suspected contamination and health effects at a public school.

Analyses of these cases provide insights into successful crisis communication and the many possibilities for dealing effectively with the media and the public to manage and minimize anger and concern. Although there is typically room for improvement in any crisis

communication response (after all, hindsight is 20/20), both cases illustrate approaches and techniques that are instructive to persons who may be called on to manage an environmental crisis. It should be noted that, due to space considerations, these cases provide only summary information; however, the major aspects of both cases are presented.

CASE ONE: CHEMICAL RELEASE NEAR RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD

Shortly after 1:00 A.M. a facility that handled a number of hazardous substances experienced a piping failure resulting in the release of sulfuric acid. Moreover, humid weather created worst-case conditions: A dense plume of sulfuric acid mist drifted slowly into a nearby residential neighborhood and across a roadway, obscuring vision and causing several traffic accidents. Public officials closed the roadway and roused and evacuated the neighboring residents. In conjunction with the release, approximately three

the facility were also briefed regularly on both the status of the investigation and the efforts being taken to communicate with the media and the community.

In anticipation of concerns regarding the health effects of sulfuric acid mist, the communications specialists took several important steps. First, they obtained from operations personnel copies of the material safety data sheets for sulfuric acid for distribution to those members of the public and the media who requested them along with additional clarification from a corporate occupational health expert regarding the potential health effects of exposure to sulfuric acid mist. Second, working with the company's occupational health expert, they made arrangements with two noted pulmonary specialists in a nearby city so that area residents who were concerned about exposure could be examined and treated, if necessary, at company expense. Third, a temporary, dedicated 800 number was set up to field calls from the public about the release and possible health effects. The dedicated phone line was answered from 8:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. seven days a week. Callers' names, addresses, and phone numbers were requested and logged along with their comments, requests, or questions. Questions and comments were also recorded for those callers who did not wish to provide their names.

The communication specialists also wrote and placed a full-page display advertisement in the local daily newspaper. The ad, which was written as an open letter to the community, apologized for the fear and inconvenience that the release had caused to area residents, provided information on the substance released (sulfuric acid) and on the fact that an investigation into the cause of the release was under way, and stated that, once the investigation was completed, its findings would be made public. The ad listed the dedicated 800 number and its hours of operation, and invited persons who had questions or comments to call the number. The ad was signed by several senior corporate managers. Due to schedule constraints at the newspaper,

the advertisement did not run until five days after the release. Since the incident was still prominent in area residents' minds, the delay was not of major consequence, however.

Several hundred copies of the same letter that comprised the ad copy, printed on the facility's letterhead, were distributed door-to-door in the neighborhood that was evacuated. These letters were distributed on the third day after the release. Additionally, since letters were distributed only in the neighborhood that had been evacuated, and not all persons in the area read the newspaper, copies of the letter were posted in local grocery and convenience stores to increase the likelihood that other area residents who had concerns about the incident would be aware of the 800 number and of the company's willingness to provide information.

Once the investigation into the cause of the incident was completed and the report describing its findings was finalized (approximately four weeks after the incident), another round of briefings with local officials, CAP members, and reporters was undertaken. A news release summarizing the findings was distributed, and a display advertisement inviting the public to the next CAP meeting, at which the findings would be discussed, was placed in the local daily paper. Corporate and facility personnel presented information and answered questions at the CAP meeting, which drew area residents who desired more information than what they had read in the newspaper. The CAP meeting was covered by the local newspaper.

The facility's crisis communication response did lack one important element which became embarrassingly apparent later on. Although the facility itself was located in one town, it was near the border of another town. The neighborhood that had been evacuated was, in fact, within the boundaries of the other town. Since the wind usually blew in the opposite direction, facility management had given little consideration to the possibility of a release into that particular neighborhood. Although facility management had communicated with

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effort made the prompt and comprehensive response possible.

Use of a forum such as a CAP meeting that was open to the public to provide important information was also an effective method for reaching out to the community. As the community interviews confirmed, the effective provision of information on the incident, potential health effects, and steps the company was taking to minimize the likelihood of such incidents in the future helped residents put the incident behind them. (Although as facility management acknowledged, other issues regarding operations at the facility and local emergency response capabilities still needed to be addressed.)

It should be noted that the management of this facility had a “leg up” on its crisis response. They had established relationships with a number of local stakeholders (and, subsequently, made moves to begin communicating with officials from the neighboring town). Management was also engaged in a regular dialogue with the community through its CAP—people who had good knowledge of the facility and could serve as sources of credible information on the incident, since facility management made sure they were kept briefed on developments. It is not difficult to imagine that the outcome of this incident would have been decidedly less favorable absent an intelligent, responsible, and comprehensive response to community concerns and needs.

CASE 2: SUSPECTED CONTAMINATION AT A PUBLIC SCHOOL

Unlike the first case, which dealt with an event of short duration, this second case is an example of a crisis involving a situation that, by its very nature, took almost three months for definitive information to become available. This case involved suspicions of contamination and an elevated incidence of cancer at a public school. As the following paragraphs will illustrate, the uncertainty surrounding the issue of whether a problem actually even existed—and the length of time

required to make such a determination—created a very different set of circumstances than the case of the chemical release.

The most active part of the “crisis” lasted about four weeks—primarily (and fortunately) because the situation broke into the media about four weeks before the end of the school year. Once the students were gone, the crisis went from a rolling boil to a fast simmer until information regarding the health of the building and the actual incidence of cancer and respiratory ailments could be developed and released. Comprehensive sampling and analysis programs for numerous substances take time to complete. In this case, the time that elapsed from collection of samples to receipt of final data took approximately six weeks; review of these data by environmental and medical personnel and preparation of a final report took another three weeks.

At this point, several years after the investigation was completed, an occasional bubble of concern still rises to the surface regarding conditions at the school, despite the fact that the investigation gave the building a clean bill of health.

Case Summary

Representatives of the teachers’ union from a public school presented the school board with a petition asking the school district’s administration to investigate the teachers’ observations that the cancer rate at one of the schools appeared to be higher than average. Their concern: Was something present in the building or on the grounds that was causing cancer among the staff? The story was quickly picked up by local and national media. Both students at the school and their parents became alarmed, especially since it was well known that several members of the teaching staff were being treated for cancer.

Heightened public concern and media attention created a crisis situation for the school district’s administration, which immediately grasped the need to launch an investigation of environmental conditions at the school and to obtain assistance in

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News coverage during the first four weeks of the crisis included interviews with teachers and parents, as well as the district administration. Although the administration managed the flow of information well within its own organization, for political reasons, it chose not to attempt to control comments from the teachers' union. In addition to comments from the physician and the environmental consultants, which were given with the coordination and permission of the district administration, news coverage included a smattering of interviews with other "experts" who gave their views on what the problems at the school might be and on how the investigation should be conducted. Related stories on sick building syndrome also appeared.

It should be noted that television cameras were barred from the classrooms, both to minimize disruption of the students and at the request of some parents. Reporters grumbled loudly over this decision, but did not override legitimate parental concerns regarding children.

A number of news releases were issued providing information on the steps that were being taken to investigate conditions at the school and to address the concerns of the students, parents, and teachers. The most notable of the news releases was one that described the sampling and analysis program. It listed the approximate numbers of the types of samples that would be collected and provided general information on how the samples would be collected. It also listed the types of substances for which the samples would be analyzed and, importantly, stated that the analytical laboratory would follow procedures approved by U.S. EPA wherever applicable in the analysis of the samples. This news release resulted in some of the more accurate reporting during the crisis situation. Several newspapers ran it verbatim. The final report on the investigation—which had been written in a manner that would allow easy understanding by laypersons—and on the cancer and respiratory ailment surveys was made available to the media at the school board meeting dedicated to discussion of the issue.

The district administration held a number of meetings with the parents and the teachers, both to hear their concerns and answer their questions and to provide more detailed information on the investigation and the surveys for cancer and respiratory ailments. Several of these meetings were attended by the consultants and the physician or one of his staff members to answer questions. Additionally, the phone number of the school district's "hot line" was heavily publicized to solicit additional questions or concerns from the public. Since this "hot line" was hooked up to an answering machine, some residents expressed frustration over their inability to talk to a person about the investigation. The assistant superintendent was readily available to answer questions and to talk to people; however, both his own lack of knowledge regarding environmental issues and the lack of information at the beginning of the investigation meant there was little information that he could give on the investigation itself.

The questions and comments left on the "hot line" were used as guides in the preparation of "parent letters" that were issued weekly. These letters, which were sent home with the students, contained information about the investigation as it progressed, as well as other information about what the administration was doing to respond to the concerns of the parents and the teachers. Additionally, the letters provided information that the school district itself pulled together, such as attendance rates in the district's schools. Ironically, the school in question had the highest attendance rate (lowest absence rate) in the district, suggesting that the students at least were not suffering immediate adverse health effects.

Copies of all of the information generated about the situation—including news releases and parent letters—were placed in binders which were available for public review in local libraries and local municipal buildings. Information binders were also available for review at the district office and at the school in question. The binders were updated at least weekly. The administration also contacted local municipal

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was voiced, the frequency of communication by the district, the fact that the investigation was initiated promptly and the school year ended kept the amount of frustration from boiling over into active protest. The administration's willingness to meet with parents, teachers, and the media—and to do so repeatedly—benefited the communication process. The assistance of a specialist in environmental communication increased the effectiveness of the communication efforts.

Use of multiple modes of communication (e.g., news conferences, news releases, meetings with parents and teachers, parent letters, and issuance of a readily understandable final report) also benefited the communication effort. Providing explanatory information about the investigation was especially beneficial, although once classes ended for the summer, and public pressure decreased, some of the technical communication that was planned and written describing the investigative process was not used. Instead, much of this information was incorporated into the final report to promote ease of understanding by laypersons.

Use of third parties, such as the representative from the state department of public health, was especially effective for credible communication of the environmental investigation and the health surveys. Additionally, having the school board (which was viewed in this particular community as highly credible) rather than the district administration (which was viewed as credible but as having a vested interest in a clean bill of health for the school) provide the vehicle (the school board meeting) for presenting the reports was a good decision.

Contacting local municipal officials at the outset of the crisis was also a good move. Doing so allowed the officials to indicate to anyone who asked that the school district had been in contact with them. Had the district administration done a poor job, either in regard to the investigation or in regard to the communication, municipal officials would likely have been put under pressure from their constituents to intervene. Early communica-

tion with them would have eased this process if such intervention had occurred.

As stated earlier, there were some difficulties (such as public displeasure with the fact that the hot line was answered by a machine rather than a person). Fortunately, the frequency of other communication kept this displeasure from becoming a major issue. There were some additional minor missteps, such as announcing a date for the completion of the investigative report which had to be pushed back by several weeks. However, overall, the crisis response was appropriate and successful. The administration was responsive to its constituencies and the media, shared information promptly and regularly, and involved third parties such as the environmental consultant, the physician, and the state department of public health representative, all of whom had the expertise to do good work and the credibility that allowed the public to accept their findings.

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS FOR MANAGING CRISIS COMMUNICATION

The following paragraphs discuss several key concepts for the successful management of communication during environmental crises.

Trusting the Power and Process of Communication

One of the greatest difficulties crisis communicators and risk communicators tend to have in serving their clients is convincing them of the effectiveness of good communication in defusing anger and lessening concerns. Most clients, whether they are of a technical or business/administration background, do not regularly grapple with tough communication issues. They are, however, aware that discussing environmental, health, and safety issues with an angry public is not easy.

Environmental crises or significant public concerns can be helped considerably by providing information that raises the public's—and the media's—understanding of both the variables that surround often complex situations and the procedures that

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PLANNING FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION RESPONSE

Planning an approach to crisis communication ahead of time can mean the difference between responding effectively or fumbling the communication function and compounding the effects of the crisis. As the two cases discussed illustrate, effective crisis communication is labor-intensive, especially during the first few hours or days, when everyone wants information immediately. In both of the cases described in this article, the facility's and school district's prompt and effective responses were possible because both organizations were well-prepared. Although the school district's administration was not necessarily prepared for an *environmental* crisis, it did understand how to deal with other types of crises and applied this knowledge to the issue raised by the teachers' union. In the case of the facility that experienced the release, management was already engaged in outreach in the community and had done some crisis communication planning as well. Additionally, both organizations' willingness to seek assistance from outside consultants familiar with environmental communication greatly increased the effectiveness of the crisis response.

At a minimum, public- and private-sector organizations should have designated spokespersons (with backup spokespersons) as well as procedures for routing calls from the media and concerned citizens to a central point. Persons who are likely to serve as spokespersons should undertake media training with an experienced coach who can provide them with techniques for answering difficult questions and handling reporters. Employees should be aware that only designated spokespersons should talk to the media to minimize misinformation, contradictory information, or the release of information that is proprietary or has not yet been confirmed. Using a team approach is important in crisis communication. Along with designating a spokesperson, a crisis response team including dedicated

support staff should be identified to ensure the timely gathering and distribution of information. Outside environmental communication assistance should be identified ahead of time. Official channels for approving news releases should also be identified in advance.

Background information on facilities, processes, and the like should be located or prepared ahead of time and kept on hand to give to reporters. This type of "boilerplate" information increases the accuracy of the reporting. Additionally, since many types of environmental incidents are rather common and can be anticipated, model generic news releases and questions and answers that, for example, provide approved wording on how a facility would respond to a chemical spill, can also be prepared ahead of time and kept on hand. Such templates can give persons charged with crisis communication a leg up in providing information in a timely manner.

Last, facilities and other organizations should compile and occasionally update lists of key stakeholders, such as local officials, heads of neighborhood associations, church leaders, and other opinion leaders so that these people can be contacted as part of the crisis communication response effort. Such people are frequently interviewed by the media about their views about the crisis. For that reason, as well as because of their standing as stakeholders, contacting them is an important component of an effective crisis communication response.

Understanding the Media

There are a number of good publications on working with the media that can be consulted for in-depth information. Some of the key concepts behind working effectively with the media are outlined below. Two of the most important points to remember are that (1) reporting is typically only as good as the information that an organization provides to reporters and (2) if the organization in question refuses to talk to reporters, the reporters will find someone who will talk to them—and the organization has just lost control of the story.

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Elected officials, in particular, want to be kept “in the loop” because other members of the public look to them to provide information and act on their behalf. Reporters seek out a variety of people to interview for news stories; thus, briefing elected and staff officials (*always* the fire department and health departments, if they are not already involved) and other opinion leaders, such as prominent area environmentalists, heads of neighborhood associations, the president of the chamber of commerce, and the like, is an important element of the crisis response both to ensure that their own questions and concerns are answered and as part of a comprehensive approach to managing news coverage.

Dealing with Emotion

Crisis situations evoke emotional responses in persons who are affected by them or perceive that they are affected by them. They also heighten emotions in the organization's employees and in the persons who must handle the actual response. Anger and fear are the most common emotions aroused by a crisis. The efficacy of communication is greatly reduced when people are viewing information through the filter of strong emotion.

The best way to deal with emotion is to acknowledge that it exists. As in the case of responsibility, it is possible to acknowledge that people are angry or frightened without agreeing that the situation is, for example, as risky as the public may believe. Instead, one acknowledges that the emotions are present. Once the acknowledgment is accepted, then people are mentally more prepared to listen to information on what is known about a situation or what is being done to remedy it. Absent the acknowledgment, people will often block out explanatory information because they are still concentrating on getting the organization in question to understand that they are angry and/or afraid. Thus, in cases in which emotions are running high, statements to both the media and stakeholders should include acknowledgments of the public's concerns early in the message.

The Role of Third Parties

The media routinely seeks out a variety of people to interview regarding a crisis. Additionally, other stakeholders, such as neighbors, may also look for input from persons who they believe can provide impartial expertise regarding the issue in question. Credible third parties can play important roles in reassuring and educating stakeholders about crisis situations. The school district administration made excellent use of credible third parties, both by hiring a physician from a well-respected local institution to conduct the health surveys and a prominent environmental consulting firm to conduct the sampling and analysis program, and by enlisting the aid of the state department of public health to review the results and publicly report an opinion on the findings.

Even though many organizations that experience environmental crises have expertise in environmental matters, working with third parties who are credible to stakeholders can instill a much greater level of confidence in the actions being taken to address a crisis than if the organization were to do all the work or communication themselves. It should be noted that the degree of credibility of specific third parties, such as government representatives, university professors, and scientists, can vary substantially among stakeholder groups. When using third parties, efforts should be made to determine who would be considered credible sources in a given community or for a specific issue.

Crisis Follow-Up and Aftermath

Since crisis situations are unpleasant, there is a tendency to stop dealing with the media and the public as soon as possible after the issue becomes old news. Crisis situations invariably remain in the public consciousness for a long time. Organizations that have experienced a crisis should consider using the crisis as a springboard to performing outreach to stakeholders. For example, managers of facilities that have had incidents often find that they are welcome speakers at business and

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sonnel who lack advanced communications skills—and to communicators, who lack technical knowledge. Organizations faced with communicating about environmental crises may need to seek out representatives from the small but growing group of professionals who know how to bridge the gap between communications and technical/regulatory issues.

Finally, it is important to note that simply *providing* information is not enough. *Listening* to what the public is saying about a crisis as it unfolds is also important, both to craft effective messages that address specific public concerns and to be responsive to public needs that may require more than information. Thus, a good portion of the crisis response should include one-on-one or small

group meetings with stakeholders (including employees) in addition to “traditional” activities involving the media.

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