

Crisis Communication

I recently had the privilege to address a session at the NYCOM Winter Legislative Meeting on the topic of crisis communications. As the former Town of Hoosick Supervisor (I'm in recovery now and doing well), I enjoyed spending time with local elected officials because it reminded me of how fulfilling public service on the local level is.



*Session topic at the 2018 NYCOM Winter Legislative Meeting |
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No two municipal crises are alike, yet they're all the same. Municipal crises are generally one of two types – those you create (think tax roll error) and those you don't (think 5 days with no power because of a 27" snow event). Rest assured, you'll ultimately be held accountable for both. A natural disaster is something the electorate won't hold you responsible for, but if it takes more than 24 hours to get electricity restored, it's your fault.

A crisis in local government is predictably unpredictable. I've been doing crisis communications work for several years, and just when I think I've seen it all, something new happens to a client or soon-to-be client.

Even if you've been mayor since the day your village or city was incorporated, and unless you handle crises day-in and day-out, you can't expect to be an expert. Communicating during a municipal crisis certainly isn't what it used to be. The local news cycle used to be predictable and, for the most part, manageable. Now, there is no longer a news

cycle. News is instant, and the word "deadline" rarely comes into a conversation any more. As soon as a story is reported and written, it goes "live" on something my nieces and nephews call the "Internet."

As a consumer of news myself, I love the instant nature of the Internet. I never really did enjoy waiting until 6:30 in the evening to see what happened in the nation and world that day. So, I love getting my news instantly. And on my schedule rather than John Chancellor's schedule.

But as a communications professional who spends a significant portion of my day dealing with various crises for various clients in various places in various time zones, I fear for the fate of humanity. As it turns out, not everything on the Internet is true. Anyone with a smartphone and an opinion (and maybe a grudge) can make your life miserable. For a long time. Upon reflection, news once a day may not have been so bad after all.

Here are the five things for you to remember about crises:

1. Events are, at least initially, out of your control.
2. If you fail to communicate to your constituents early in the crisis, you've lost the high ground.
3. If you lie to your constituents, you've lost them – probably forever (and you're going to get caught).
4. Your constituents expect instant communication.
5. Sometimes your constituents know more about what's going on than you do.

If you try to create a Crisis Communication Plan in the midst of a crisis, you'll muck up both. Remember the words of the late Dwight D. Eisenhower (a fella who knew something about plans), *"In preparing for **battle** I have always found that **plans** are useless, but **planning** is indispensable."* I think what the General was saying is that you have to actually think ahead, be prepared for what could happen, and be able to swiftly adapt to events as they unfold.

Here are some things to think about in developing a Crisis Communications Plan for your municipality.

First, decide ahead of time who speaks for your municipality in a time of crisis

Generally, that job falls to the chief elected official with support from others (police, fire, rescue, legal, etc.). Make sure everyone knows *who is* and *who is not* authorized to speak in a time of crisis. Communicating in the middle of a crisis is challenging enough, but having to take back something a well-meaning staffer in the Code Enforcement Department says off handedly to a reporter can be a nightmare. The press will label anyone who works for your municipality as an "official."

Know ahead of time who your key audiences are

Obviously, the residents in your community are a key audience, but there are others and the time to identify those important audiences (and scramble for a way to communicate with them) isn't in the middle of a crisis. For example, if your crisis is the result of a natural disaster of some kind, then your state and federal representatives are a key audience. They can muster resources you don't have access to (and sometimes funds to clean up the mess).

Know as many key facts about your municipality as you can

Keep them handy and keep them updated. Knowing what your annual budget is, what your tax rate is, how many people live within your borders will not only make you sound smart to the outside world, it sends a clear message to your constituents that you're on top of things.

In a Municipal Crisis, there are three Golden Rules when it comes to communications.

First, make your messages clear, simple and direct

Leaving your audiences with any question about what you've said defeats the purpose of communicating in the first place. The goal is to leave them informed and confident, not confused and irritated. Test your message(s) on a spouse or significant other. If they don't understand what you're trying to communicate, neither will your key audiences.

Next, accept the fact that the answer to some questions might be, "I simply don't know"

Elected officials of all stripes and at all levels tend to want to be helpful to their constituents. Telling your audience that you don't know, but will do all you can to find out, is a much more powerful answer than some gobbledygook answer with no factual basis.

Finally, and this should go without saying, but you are the government. As such, your constituents have every right to expect that you'll be telling them the truth

If you lie to them and violate their trust, you needn't worry about crisis communication for long – the people you represent will graciously un-elect you at the next possible opportunity.

Not all Crisis Communication is as simple as I have laid out above, but it also isn't rocket science. Like every other field of study, the landscape changes with regularity, but the underlying principles remain constant.