

Want the Boss to Participate, to Behave During Crisis? Have

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What Should the Boss Really Do in a Crisis?

By James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, CCEP

When it comes to readiness and crisis response preparation, there must be more complaining about bosses being burdens and barriers than any other topic. There are two principal reasons for this complaining and whining. First, it is true. A large number of bosses actively avoid participating in disaster, crisis, and business recovery exercises. Those who put these exercises on tend to take this approach by organizational leadership as a personal insult. If you stand back for a moment and think about how most drills and exercises are conducted, their very nature is contrary to how operating executives learn, teach, and live, and how they measure their own success and need to succeed.

In the first place, most operating executives feel that their organizations, and they themselves, are competent enough to handle most emergency situations without a whole lot of preparation—unless of course, it is required by law, rule, or regulation. Executives from academic management training programs are taught that, whether we believe it or not, they are invincible and smart enough to figure almost anything out. When you think about how we structure exercises, quite often it would seem that the intent of most exercises is to have the participants feel fairly stupid, weak, or only minimally competent, we look for errors. Operators believe that mistakes can indicate important pathways to future success. They may seem the same but the attitude that is different.

Another difference is that managers are taught that there are solutions to everything, but it requires smart people to find them. In the response business, we are more of the mindset that bad things are going to happen and we will have to make the best of it by accommodating, preempting, or preventing various aspects of these serious situations from occurring or maximally responding when they do. From an operating perspective, this philosophy is too granular and too much "in the weeds" to be of concern to management. If this is what you have managers and leaders observe during your exercises, they are going to get bored pretty quickly. It's what they pay you to know.

The second reason management avoids exercises and drills is that, in management there is always a place for the manager and leader. There is a pecking order, and a sense of responsibility and leadership. In crisis, especially in drills and exercises, the organizational leadership often feels as though they have no place because, in reality, they don't. Specialists generally handle crisis situations and tell operating executives what to do. It is not a lot of fun for the boss to hang around even a really good exercise, if you have no particular role and those around you are keeping you from directing the work of the command center or response process. Why should they come for that?

The lesson of all of this is that one of the more powerful weaknesses in crisis response is the lack of specific roles and assignments for top management. They are "briefed" occasionally and left to sit in a room waiting to hear reports from the field. The result of this crucial gap in crisis management planning is the mismanagement, lack of management, or paralysis that afflicts crisis response efforts. Because, when adversity occurs, management has the tendency to "huddle" and think of new ways to for the organization to manage the situation. Meanwhile, we all wait outside the door in hopes of getting instructions to move forward while doing nothing. This defect occurs all too frequently in the plans I review, responses I analyze, and scenarios I explore with client companies.

If it is a true crisis, some top person's career or job is on the line. If your exercise cannot reach this level of intensity or impact, what should they participate? The process actually begins with a more strategic statement about what a crisis actually is, and then moves to some of the more specific issues and questions that really do involve senior executive decision making, leadership, and sensitivity. For example, here is my strategic definition of a crisis. Yours may differ, but let's talk about it after you see mine.

"A crisis is a show stopping, people stopping, product stopping, reputation defining event that creates victims and/or explosive visibility."

The operative, driving concept of this definition is the word "victims." If you blow something up, burn something down, wreck something, or otherwise disable something, but you fail to injure or kill any people or animals, or despoil someone's watershed, forest, air space, river, or backyard, it's not really a crisis; it's just a bad day for somebody's budget, probably yours.

The reason for this discussion is to keep your staff function from looking and sounding like "chicken little," where every little pratfall and problem is talked about in crisis response terms. Be a pragmatist about these things. When you work at the highest levels, you need bring management the highest level problems—the situations should keep them awake at night.

In the course of directing a client's crisis response, analyzing past responses to crisis, or developing powerful response strategies, it's clear to me that crisis response promptness and effectiveness depends on having five essential responsibilities spelled out carefully in your crisis plan for the CEO (or surviving leaders), and for the senior team:

1. Assert the moral authority expected of ethical leadership. No matter how devastating or catastrophic the crisis is, in most cultures forgiveness is possible provided the organization, through its early behaviors and leadership, takes appropriate and expected steps to learn from and deal with the issues. The response strategy, overseen by top management, must again be strategic in nature and address the most crucial aspects of successfully responding. There are five crucial strategic crisis response ingredients, which must be initiated promptly, usually within the first 37 – 60 minutes, to move this process forward and establish a reputation protecting platform for leadership. The five ingredients, in order, are:

- **First, stop the production of victims.** If it's leaking, foaming, stinking, or burning, deal with that first.
- **Second, manage the victim dimension.** Too often the organizations afflicted takes on the false and arrogant affliction of considering itself to be as victimized as those whose lives have been changed, ended, or put on hold.
- **Third, communicate with employees and key audiences.** Failure to communicate, for any reason, is the most toxic approach to communications. This is because failure for top management to communicate means that everyone else must and will communicate, except, of course, they will all be making it up.
- **Fourth, deal with the indirectly affected.** This would include neighbors, business associates, allies, partners, people who essentially now have a problem only because you have a problem. It also involves notifying the appropriate authorities as required by laws, rules, regulations, and common sense.
- **Fifth, deal with the self-appointed, self-anointed including the news media, critics and others who opt into the situation, on their own, for whatever reason.** Here again, failure to respond and deal with these individuals will simply exacerbate the situation. It's part of the pattern of crisis response and readiness. Be prepared to deal with it, or to make significant suggestions to those in charge, so that they can confidently deal with these elements of response.

The elements of an ethical leadership response include:

- Candor and disclosure (acknowledgment that something adverse has happened or is happening)
- Explanation and revelation about the nature of the problem (some early analysis)
- Commitment to communicate throughout the process (even if there are lots of critics)
- Answer the questions
- Empathy (intentional acts of helpfulness, kindness, and compassion)
- Oversight (inviting outsiders, even victims, to look over your shoulders)
- Commitment to zero (finding ways to prevent similar events from occurring again)
- Apology - Acceptance of responsibility, or sincere expressions of regret and concern
- Restitution or penance (paying the price – generally doing more than would be expected, asked for, or required)

If the boss or those who represent the boss act callously, arrogantly, or with excessive testosterone, everyone else in the organization tends to act the same way, and it complicates things, makes the situation worse and often triggers or inspires additional litigation from newly created victims of these behaviors.

2. Take responsibility for the care of victims. The single most crucial element in any crisis, aside from ending the victim-causing event, is managing the victim dimension. There are only three kinds of victims: people, animals, and living systems. It is top management's responsibility to see that appropriate steps are taken to care for victims' needs. This is both a reputation preservation and a litigation reduction activity. Most devastating responses to crises occur when victims are left to their own devices, when victims' needs go unfulfilled, or for whatever reasons (usually legal) the organization that created the victims refuses to take even the simplest of humane steps to ease the pain, suffering, and victimization of those afflicted. Out of all of the CEO's essential responsibilities, taking a personal interest and an active role in the care of victims is the most important. Maintain a positive, constructive pressure to get victim issues resolved promptly.

3. Set the appropriate tone for the organizational response. Tone refers to internal management behavior and language that helps the organization meet the expectations triggered by a crucial, critical, or catastrophic situation. If senior management takes on the defensive posture of being the victim or the one attacked, the entire organization will react in the same way. Very rarely are large organizations and institutions considered victims, even when they are attacked or victimized. They are generally considered to be perpetrators at worst or arrogant bystanders "who deserve it" at best.

It is the most senior executives who need to set a constructive tone that encourages positive attitudes, language, and prompt responses. This approach protects the organization's relationships with various constituents during the response and recovery period, shows respect for victims, and reduces the threat of trust or reputation damage.

4. Set the organization's voice. Put a face and a voice on the organization or institution as it moves through the crisis. This action is directed towards the external world – how we describe ourselves, what we are doing, how the response is going, what responsibilities we are taking, and what outside scrutiny we are inviting. Use positive language, be helpful, and suggest earlier resolution.

Avoid disparaging, demeaning, or discrediting any group or person. A major leadership communication goal is to avoid or reduce the production of critics, complainers, and opponents, even though these very people and organizations continue to attack relentlessly.

5. Commit acts of leadership at every level. Leaders acting like leaders has significance during urgent situations. Literally walk around and talk to people. Encourage, suggest, knock down barriers, and help everyone stay focused on the ultimate response process goals. Random acts of leadership are always welcome in any environment, but especially during crisis. Ninety percent of senior executive activities should have executives out-and-about being leaders, motivators, and instigators of empathy, rather than huddling in their executive offices trying to determine what steps should be taken to resolve the situation, and how to get even or discredit someone for the trouble that has been caused.

Perhaps the most powerful discipline the crisis advisor can bring to management is the ability to interpret what is happening in terms of the pattern of events each circumstance or scenario represents. Become a window to the future. This means that whether it is a situation of local violence, an attack on your basic systems, or a tremendous disaster, what management wants to know most is what will happen tomorrow.

Virtually every other topic is wasted because everything else deals with yesterday. Senior leaders are people of tomorrow, people of the future. Understand the patterns of the events you are preparing to respond to, and be prepared to describe these patterns of events and the potential outcomes with management. It is possible that a number of things you will tell management will be in error and turn out to be wrong.

I have learned this over many years of being a forecaster. But I have also learned that when I am walking through these explanations I am bound to be right often half the time. This tends to make you look like a genius as events unfold but, more importantly, management will come to rely on your judgment and your ability to look down the road because it is their career that is at stake in these circumstances, and rarely that of the crisis manager or the incident commander.

Of all of these, it is the prevention of similar occurrences that will help victims come to closure and provide sufficient evidence that enough lessons have been learned to avoid the need for litigation and other forms of public embarrassment and humiliation.

All crises are management problems first. Preplanning and rehearsing executive actions can avoid career-defining moments including specific executive instructions in all plans and response scenarios, and briefing executives on what is expected of them and what they will learn is a powerful way to convene executive participation and, who knows, maybe even a little executive appreciation.

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James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, CCEP, is a crisis response expert with an international reputation. He advises senior leadership and guides staff functions in the planning, installation, testing, and actual response circumstance of crises and disaster. His new book, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You? The Seven Disciplines of the Trusted Strategic Advisor*, (Jossey Bass 2008) is in bookstores and available from www.barnesandnoble.com and www.amazon.com. His Web site, www.e911.com, is a content-rich crisis management teaching site. E-mail him at crisisguru@e911.com.

Jim is author of the Executive Action(c) series, including [Crisis Communication Planning Strategies](#).



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