



Why Should the Boss Listen to You?

When to Send the Boss

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Question: When is it wise, and under what circumstances, should we recommend that the boss be sent into a situation as a spokesperson or as a leader during the remediation response to a crisis situation?

Answer: This is the crucial question that, at some point, confronts every crisis response planner and advisor. Too often, this decision is ignored until the question gets raised at the height of a serious problem or situation.

When there are many victims and great threat to reputation and constituent relationships, sending the boss can be a powerful signal and symbol. Thus, if and when to send the boss is one of the most strategic decisions made in crisis response situations.

There are several schools of thought. The first is to send the boss whenever there are victims. The second is to pick selected scenarios in which the boss would be expected to be out front. The third is that the boss only goes out when he/she wants to go out.

Here are nine examples of situations that absolutely require the presence of the/a boss. Remember also, the smaller the market,

the fewer fatalities or victims it takes to require senior management presence.

1. Human injury or death of some magnitude (massive casualties)
2. Unusual death or threat situation, explosive visibility, negligence, significant collateral victim generation (people, animals, living systems)
3. Major environmental accident or health and safety threat situations
4. Massive animal kill, injury, or threat to their well-being
5. Significant accident or incident involving employees
6. Serious, emotionally disruptive, or dramatic situations, e.g., layoffs, shut downs, significant job actions, community upset, demonstrations, highly emotional outpouring of negative (or positive) public sentiment
7. Employee suicide or dangerous threatening situation
8. Extremely negative reputation-defining situation such as an indictment, debarment, significant product failure, tampering, or negligence
9. Major data breach, releasing thousands of Social Security Numbers and other private data

My personal approach is, first and foremost, to determine how the CEO actually feels about public involvement in crisis situations. Usually a far better result is achieved if there is an inclination upfront on the part of the CEO to speak or to be visible. I ask three questions. Is this top person willing to be coached, either by internal resources or external consultants as a part of preparation and response process? Will the boss absorb and implement the coaching they receive? Will the boss participate in drills and exercises as a part of the readiness process?

Participation in drills and exercises is important for three powerful reasons. First, the boss will be far less surprised when things happen and will be ready to effectively do what is necessary. Second, it sends the most powerful signal possible to others playing readiness roles that this is important to the boss and, therefore, should be important to them. Third, in my experience, the organization does a far better job of responding when the boss assumes a leadership role.

Of the three possible approaches to sending the boss in a crisis situation, I prefer the middle approach, which is essentially scenario-based: pick selected situations in which the boss would be expected to be out front.

You will need to identify the scenarios that could be the most damaging, or the most victim creating, or that might create a more persistent situation that creates bad news and embarrassment. Develop response plans where the CEO plays a crucial communications role.

My approach is to:

- Select three really tough, embarrassing, victim producing or explosive visibility scenarios.
- Run the scenarios by the boss and explain that these are situations where it could be expected that the most senior person in the organization (assuming that person survives or is not too severely

injured) would be expected to be out front making statements and highly visible.

- Always ask if there are more important scenarios from their perspective where they feel they should be visible. You might be surprised. They may have two or three that you haven't thought of or that you hadn't thought were as important as they actually turn out to be.
- Start with whichever scenarios you can agree to and develop response scripts and a sequence of actions, behaviors, and decisions the CEO will need to make and carry out as a part of those scenarios.
- Do a private briefing, walking the senior executive and perhaps one or two other senior people through the scenarios to make certain that they remain as important to the boss as they were when you began, to give these senior people the opportunity to react to what you propose and to offer suggestions, comments, and criticisms; and to practice what they would be doing in a future exercise or real situation.
- Ask again if there are other problems in addition to the ones you talked through that may be more important and should be prepared for. If the answer is yes and new scenarios are mentioned, get those ready as well. Prioritize them from your perspective and from theirs.
- Avoid planning a role for the CEO in scenarios where he/she has had little or no input because the CEO will either not participate or simply take over and do whatever they please. Even if you disagree with the CEO's choices for visibility and participation, it is their ship, their watch, their reputation, and their career. The CEO has the power to decide. Get on the team and work it through with him or her.
- Also remember that the views of the boss' back-up individual(s) need to be solicited too. There may be scenarios where the boss is either completely unavailable, injured, or incapacitated. The number two's wishes in terms of preparation for readiness will need to be considered in your planning, rehearsal, and scenario development processes. When bad things happen, they are managed by the people who survive and the people who show up. The essence of readiness is to be prepared from top to bottom when a crisis occurs. Making these decisions from the very beginning about what top executives do is crucial to having an effective, prompt first response and to setting the tone and direction for other responders as well.

About the Author

*Have a question for Jim Lukaszewski? E-mail him at crisiguru@e911.com. Make your subject line "CPM Questions." Include your full contact information, including a telephone number and e-mail address. If your need is urgent, please clearly say so. If you'd like your questions answered in this column, please say so. Jim Lukaszewski's new book, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You*, published by Jossey-Bass, is now available in bookstores. Contact Jim directly at (914) 681-0000, or visit his Web site at www.e911.com. All questions and answers used in these columns become the property of the CPM Group and may be used in other media and products.*