

# Becoming a Crisis Guru

*Why Crisis Management Is as Difficult as Ever*

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All too often the phone rings and on the other end of the line is a college senior about to graduate who tells me he or she plans to specialize in crisis management and is looking for a position in this field. Sometimes it's a reporter who has decided to move on from journalism because he or she feels his or her experience with crises is significant. My presumption is that the "significant" he or she is referring to is having spent a career witnessing crises for others.

Having been in this practice for close to 30 years, my view is that becoming a true guru in crisis communications remains as difficult as ever, despite an attitude among many PR practitioners, agencies and organizations that appear to support the opposite belief.

Hurricane Katrina provided abundant illustrations of how easy it is to talk about crisis, but how difficult it is to say or do something about it that actually matters. I remember receiving a phone call from a practitioner located near me regarding an op-ed column he had published in the local newspaper attacking the governor of Louisiana, the mayor of New Orleans, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and President Bush, among others, for their alleged incompetence and lack of preparation. After congratulating himself, he asked what I thought.

My questions to him were, "Have you ever been in a flood of any kind, piled sandbags or searched for the dead

and missing? Have you ever been in a circumstance where there was total darkness, no power and you were up to your chest in water, with snakes and other animals swimming around, while you were trying to save your own life? Have you ever worked with victims searching for lost loved ones or those who have become disoriented and unable to manage their own affairs due to a catastrophe they were helpless to prevent? Have you been in a plane crash, been involved in rescue work, or seen or experienced the deep psychological trauma that mass-casualty situations cause? Have you ever experienced the smells of crisis, disaster or catastrophe?"

His answer to each question was, "No." I then asked him why he was writing about the circumstance in Louisiana without credentials for doing so. The conversation ended shortly after my questions.

This story goes to the heart of being a crisis guru and a qualification too often ignored by practitioners in our profession — actual experience. We anoint ourselves as qualified to comment because we've watched the news, read a newspaper or had a conversation with someone rather than because we've actually been in the arena, perhaps at some personal risk. It's inside that arena of experience, disaster and victimization where credentials for such commentary and advice giving are generally established.

Yes, just about anyone, even a teenager, can give you the formula for getting out of trouble: Fess up quickly, accommodate the criticism, apologize and move on. It would be wonderful if this pleasant level of simplicity applied to every serious situation. The mysterious part deals with how and why humans react to crises the way they do. Here's another example.

Your client has a special program it conducts every Christmas in partnership with a local social service agency to provide wrapped gifts to underprivileged children. Last year, one of the children received a wrapped package that contained pornographic materials, a matter the parents brought to the attention of the local television station before they called either the company or the social service agency.

Until that incident, the program seemed valuable, useful and even humanitarian. Everyone was seen as a good guy.

## CRISIS MANAGEMENT

To worsen matters, the parents of the child who received the material were upset because one of the sister companies your client owns is a national bookstore chain that has been repeatedly in the news for selling adult publications such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. The questions you face are: Do we take all the merchandise back? Do we call parents and tell them to open the gifts out of sight of their children to make sure they are safe? Do we offer compensation and other inducements to the affected family? Do we do something for every child who received one of these gifts, whether it was suspect or not?

The question the crisis guru asks first is, What is the central issue? Of all the issues in this scenario, which is the most important problem or question management faces? After all, crises are management problems before they are any other kind of problem, including communications. The central issue turns out to be the local government agency. In the United States, there is limited participation between government and private businesses. Some intentional separation is always established and maintained. In this case, the social service agency was the source for the names of the underprivileged children and had unintentionally put these children at risk. Basically, the agency had provided the victims.

When I run this problem as a business leadership simulation, toward the end of the discussion, the public agency announces that it's severing ties with the company and permanently ending its participation in any similar programs. We, the company, have embarrassed an important agency, which now must back away from the program and from us. The agency will suffer some public consequences at the hands of legislators and other public overseers, including the news media.

Preserving the integrity of the agency is far more important and more complicated than addressing the families involved or the company's reputation. Much must happen quickly when responding, but focusing early on the core issue, the agency, is the key to lowering collateral damage and managing the entire scenario. Yet in the business case discussion, this insight is rarely identified early enough.

So, how does one become a guru? How does one gain a reputation and attract followers? It seems to me there are at least five attributes of guruship:

**Real expertise.** Beyond the typical PR assumption-driven, cookie-cutter approaches, this expertise is based on experience, surviving some fairly bad scrapes and mistakes, and the ability to promptly share the lessons from these experiences.

**Insight.** Insight is new information generated and knowledge created or discovered from existing facts and data, including related experiences. Leaders seek gurus who have a deeper knowledge, stronger understanding and better ability to see why things happen or ways to detect, deter or pre-empt trouble.

**Influence.** Generally through teaching and coaching, influence is the ability to help people understand, discuss and develop appropriate approaches and solutions through the power of their words and thought processes.

**Selflessness.** Putting others' needs, concerns, questions and success before your own.

**Pragmatism.** Doing the doable, getting the gettable, knowing the knowable, achieving the achievable and offering sensible, simple, constructive help. These behaviors and approaches build trust and confidence in those preparing to deal with serious problems.

To be taken seriously by management, a working definition of crisis needs to be developed that shifts attention to the necessary concerns. Here's my definition; you might have a different approach. A crisis is a people-stopping, show-stopping, product-stopping, reputation-defining or trust-busting event that creates victims or explosive visibility. The operative word in this definition is "victims." The absence of victims means the absence of crisis. If you blow something up, burn something down, spill something or even destroy something, and neither humans nor animals are affected, it may be a significant incident and bad for someone's budget, but it fails to rise to crisis level. A guru preserves the value of that status by how he or she describes and labels what matters.

The guru's real territory is helping management answer questions about what matters and then suggesting or guiding appropriate, constructive, ethical action. The first challenge is always to make certain that the company, organization or individual being advised behaves in a way that community, victim and public expectations are met. If that happens, it's amazing how much of the rest takes care of itself. ■

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