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The Boss' Most Crucial Role in Crisis

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One of the more powerful weaknesses in crisis response is the lack of specific roles and assignments for top management. The result of this crucial gap in crisis management planning is the mismanagement, lack of management, or paralysis that afflicts crisis response efforts. This defect occurs all too frequently in plans I review, responses I analyze, and scenarios I explore with client companies.

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 plans for the CEO (or surviving leaders):

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 behaviors, briefly and in order, are:
 - Candor and disclosure (acknowledgement 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)
 - 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)
 - Restitution or penance (paying the price – generally doing more than would be expected, asked for, or required)
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's 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.

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

It's 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 emotional voice.*** Put a compassionate face and a voice on the organization or institution as it moves through the crisis, our emotional connection to those who are suffering. This action is directed towards how we describe ourselves, what we're doing, how the response is going, what responsibilities we're taking, and what outside scrutiny we're inviting.
5. ***Commit acts of leadership at every level.*** Leaders acting like leaders has great 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. Rather than huddling in their executive offices trying to determine what steps should be taken to resolve the situation, ninety percent of senior executive activities should have executives out-and-about being leaders, motivators, and instigators of empathy.

Of all of these, it's 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.

Few problems are really crises. But all crises are serious management problems. Preplanning executive actions can avoid career-defining moments. Include specific executive expectation instructions in all plans and response scenarios.

Copyright © 2016, James E. Lukaszewski. All rights reserved. Jim is President of The Lukaszewski Group, a Division of Risdall Marketing. His name appeared in PR Week as one of 22 "crunch-time counselors who should be on your speed dial in a crisis." Corporate Legal Times listed Jim as, "One of 28 experts to call when all hell breaks loose." If you'd like more information, please visit the author's website at www.e911.com.