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## Communicating During a Crisis: What You Need to Know

Toxic toys, collapsing mines and corrupt executives...these recent news headlines read like an organization's worst nightmare. Known as corporate crisis, these events can threaten the integrity and reputation of your company and can strike at any time. In the event of a crisis you must be prepared to tackle the onslaught of media attention, contend with public outrage and cope with employees.

Two people who understand crisis management better than anyone are Dr. Peter M. Sandman, an internationally recognized risk communication expert and Brian Sibley, a public relations expert from the Washington based firm Baron PR. Dr. Sandman and Sibley offer crisis management from two different, but equally insightful perspectives that will help guide you through your company's worst-case scenario.

One of the first steps that experts recommend you take during a time of crisis is to refer to your organization's crisis communication plan. If designed correctly,

the plan will define the roles of your coworkers and outline the immediate actions that should be taken. Well-developed plans are flexible and scalable. "Companies that have plans generally do a better job at managing a crisis," offered Dr. Sandman. He warned, however, that sticking to the plan may do more harm than good (in some instances). "The crisis you plan for is rarely the crisis that happens."



The demand for information will be immediate during a crisis. Dr. Sandman and Sibley agree that one of the biggest mistakes that a company can make is to under

communicate or respond with "no comment." "Most companies view crisis in terms of legal liability," Sibley offered. "But a crisis should be viewed in terms of two courts - the court of law and the court of public opinion." Viewing a crisis with only the court of law in mind may determine your company's liability in a crisis, but it will not endear your organization to the public. The ability to preserve your company's reputation and to maintain its public status will be determined by the court of public opinion. "If you can't provide the media with information, they will get it from whoever will talk to them," said Sibley. "Provide employees with the same message that you are providing to the media," Dr. Sandman advised. This helps to reinforce your overall message and in the event that an employee does speak with the media, he/she will be armed with the correct message.

Dr. Sandman warns against overconfidence. "During a crisis, most organizations want to over reassure," he said. The automated response most companies have is to want to calm people down. "But being upset is okay.

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# Crisis Communication

Panic is rare, but you want fear. When people are afraid, they take more precaution.” Dr. Sandman also believes that the goal is to help guide people through the crisis. The other ill-fated statement is the “everything-is under-control” message. This message usually backfires and the public and media “smell a rat.”

Speaking with one voice is a universal notion in crisis communication, but when your organization has people with conflicting views, Dr. Sandman advises that you acknowledge the differences in opinion.

“There is a great deal of

communicating during a crisis, so the idea that you can be the only source is nuts.” The best way to prevent mixed messaging is to inform stakeholders up-front, so that the messages are the same. The rumor mill is sure to be in motion during a crisis. “Rumors should not be ignored,” Dr. Sandman believes. He follows the World Health Organization’s view that suggests rumors serve as an early warning system. Instead of ignoring rumors, he advocates addressing them head-on.

There is no guarantee of recovery from a corporate crisis. Several

uncontrollable factors will determine the fate of your organization, but there are factors that you bear control over: preparedness and your actions. Both Dr. Sandman and Sibley suggest that managing these elements will significantly increase your chances of recovery and help to maintain your company’s reputation.

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#### Expert Sources:

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