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Strategic Management of Crises

By Christine G. Springer

Some managers shine during a major crisis, while others don't. As a strategic manager, one must follow a comprehensive protocol that includes the implementation of teams, systems and tools to respond to a crisis. It also requires having an action plan in place to react quickly, manage rumors and respond to victims and stakeholders sincerely while recovering from the crises' impact. It starts with being willing to ask and answer important questions like: *What is the worst that could happen?* It then requires addressing how to plan for and avert crises by securing the workplace and the proper management of workplace, technical, intentional and natural disasters as well as effectively communicating during a crisis.

In assessing workplace threats, it is important to understand that almost every employer has three paramount duties when a threat arises. First, there is a duty to care. When someone causes harm and the media later reports it, the question arises whether or not an employer was previously aware that this person made threats and the employer did or did not do anything about it. Secondly, there is a duty to warn. A perpetrator sometimes acts without warning but there often are pre-incident indicators of what could occur requiring some kind of risk communication which may occur through a collaborative discussion about the advantages or drawbacks in a small group meeting, a memo, or an individual session with those potentially impacted usually with some level of law enforcement involvement. Thirdly, there is a duty to act. As an example, there may be an obligation to act when an employee indicates that he or she is being harassed or threatened. Common responses include offering the employee a cell phone to call police coming to or from work if threatened, hiring an external security firm to patrol certain areas and/or documenting suggestions to the employee to work from an alternate location, if possible. Once a manager is aware that a problem employee is exhibiting disturbing behavior, a pre-selected threat assessment team should review key issues like what the specific content of the threat is, does it explicitly suggest intent to do harm and what is the capacity, skill set and mental state of the person posing the threat. Even when a person has no intention to do harm and merely verbally expresses a threat, harm can be done if not taken seriously by management.

When the crisis is health related, industrial or environmental, having a crisis team and a plan in place greatly benefits the organization. The crisis team ideally is composed of those who can help anticipate the impact of something like the declining health of the organization and its operation. For example, what happens when 30% of the workforce becomes sick and incapable of working? Recommended actions might include such things as knowing who is traveling and how they can get home, identifying one individual who will communicate the plan to employees and encouraging that person to work from home in a pandemic event, insuring that business travelers see doctors upon their return, considering the impact of prolonged salary and benefit continuation on the budget and having a succession plan in place for mission-critical people. Industrial and environmental disasters are difficult to plan for because the scope of the damage that can arise from industrial accidents is incredibly diverse and because many managers believe that these events are similar to traditional workplace crises and that those involved will be able to apply the same crisis standards that generally seem to work. They mistakenly assume that those

involved will understand the nuances of matters such as technological science and construction dynamics which are usually and unfortunately unique unto themselves.

Factors to consider in drafting an industrial and environmental disaster plan include the proximity of facilities to utility lines and major highways and rail lines where toxic materials are transported, preparedness of local first responders to major disasters, adequacy of on-site medical response and safety systems, chemicals kept on-site and who manages them as well as the last time senior management focused on things like waste management, local pollution controls or toxic chemical spills.

It is also important to have a crisis communications plan in place. There is no real way to know when a crisis will occur and it is usually disruptive with damage lasting for weeks or even months. So it pays to be prepared. Often that amounts to being able to answer three questions when the event occurs: What do we know? When did we know it? What are we going to do about it and when?

In any crisis, a strategic manager will ask these and other questions to help frame his or her crisis communications plan. When the crisis is confirmed, the wheels of response should begin turning so that within eight hours a coherent, consistent, continual response to stakeholders and to the media begins. This is possible by first, creating a fact sheet on the scope of the incident and verifying with those involved all the facts associated with the event, preparing a brief statement for phone operators so that they know what they can and cannot say, and finally, operationalizing a communications process with each key stakeholders by first assigning one person to each stakeholder group and then having them own and manage the communications process for that group using the factsheet that has been developed.

Regardless of the organization, it helps to have a basic crisis communications plan in place that covers seven critical elements. First, it should outline the hierarchy of who will speak for organization including office, home and cell phone numbers of the crisis team, crisis counselors, legal counsel and an insurance company. Secondly, it should designate where the crisis team will meet, who owns the communications aspect of responses and who will activate the crisis alert system. Thirdly, it should embed some core crisis messages in the system that will be immediately operational with statements like “based on what we know at this point...” Fourth, it should identify and answer the twenty worst questions that could be asked about the incident by the media or the public with an opening statement of two minutes or less. Often this two-minute statement simply tracks back to the three core questions: *What Do We Know? When Did We Know It? What Are We Going To Do About It?* Fifth, it should publicize the organization’s actions through traditional media networks that the team is comfortable working with. Sixth, it should frame the crisis properly by defining it as an incident or a crisis based upon the facts and the information available. Seventh, it should ask the media and the community to help and have a continual communications process in place so that they, stakeholders, victims, survivors and law enforcement officials are kept informed and also asked to provide critical information to inform and improve the strategic management of the crisis.

Strategic management of crises requires planning and preparation as well as the consideration of events and impacts that managers, victims and stakeholders would rather not think about.

However, taking the time to think about and plan for the *worst that could happen* insures for those involved that rather than having the event manage everything – they are able also to manage the event.