

## Turning a Public Crisis Around

*Kare Anderson*

Perhaps, bad things won't happen if you don't think about them. Most leaders, like most humans in their personal lives, avoid planning for disasters. Because planning is usually a thankless task, people often don't take action until after a crisis has hit them, someone they know, someone who is like them, or a person in an industry like theirs.

Yet, now more than ever, every organization needs a plan. Responding quickly, fully, and truthfully is the only way you can keep the faith of the publics you serve, inside and outside your organization. Witness some fast-breaking and wide-ranging stories: Odwalla Foods, with its quick, consistent response to the news that some of its apple juice was contaminated; and Microsoft, with its changing public and legal stances in the face of federal investigations. As in these private sector examples, a community's advance preparation for several kinds of crisis is all the more crucial today. Why? Because technology enables news to travel farther, faster, and by more and more means.

Almost immediately these days, people can learn the truth in several, often-conflicting versions faster and from more places and perspectives than before. Then, they can form their own views and see how these views stack up with those of the general public. Like a videotape of a tennis game seen in fast forward, the ball of information and opinions bounces back and forth at warp speed. Some organizations still might be trying to choose a spokesperson while the ball has already made several trips both ways, right over their heads; they aren't yet participating in the game being played with their issue.

And human nature remains the same in one way: bad news always travels faster than good news. What can you do to protect your or your organization's reputation in the face of a future crisis? It may arise out of an inaccurate, incomplete, or biased government or other official or media announcement. Or it may take the form of an attack from someone, perhaps even a credible, well-known, well-liked, or powerful figure.

### **If You Throw Mud, You Get Dirty**

Some years ago, actress Meryl Streep appeared in a television-show interview targeted at women viewers, holding her young child in her arms. She made a tender picture, and not surprisingly, was eloquent and sincere (though inaccurate) as she spoke of her concerns about the danger she believed the waxy coating on apples posed to the health of her child. Within hours, a chorus of (male) representatives from various growers, marketing boards, and processors responded on TV, coming across as frowning and harsh as they castigated Streep for her "ignorance" and "irresponsible action." This continued for some weeks, enhancing the controversy.

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Several nutritionists, though characterized by some consumer activists as being “bought off by the industry,” spoke earnestly, obscurely, at great length, and with some ambiguity. Not surprisingly, quotations of their words were always fully and accurately covered. Confusion reigned. Finally, two months after the Streep interview, a government report concluded that the waxy coating did not harm young children—a point that the apple industry had already had the facts about but not the right approach to being heard.

As a former reporter, I must agree that media people are mighty and not always even-handed animals. Coverage of the government report was much less prominent than coverage of the growers’ initial attacks on Streep. More recently, when the U.S. media announced the contamination of certain strawberries, David Reid of the California Strawberry Board immediately briefed the media on how the source of the strawberries was being tracked and when information could be expected.

He was open and not defensive with the media about not knowing the source at that time. When he spoke to reporters, his voice was low and not rushed. He was brief and to the point, and his expression remained genial and concerned.

### **Open to Public View**

David Reid had an “open” face, that is, his eyebrows were slightly raised, and his cheeks and mouth were softened, free of tightness. How did he achieve this? Because he had practiced before this crisis, because he knew that someday there probably would be one. And he practiced before each interview. Sound artificial? Consider what is at stake for you and for your organization.

Perceptions color reality. If you look angry, resentful, and evasive, even when you are telling the truth, people will usually trust their eyes first. Make your appearance congruent with your words, and make your message vivid, truthful, compelling, and succinct.

When Reid was asked a negative, emotion-charged question, he did not use the same approach in responding. He reframed the question to be more neutral and then responded to it. Here, his goal was to make his characterization of the situation more vividly memorable than anyone else’s, so his would be the question most frequently used in later discussions and in media coverage.

### **Eight Ways to Face a Crisis Before it Happens**

**1. Picture the situation, and put in some practice before you need it.** You can’t anticipate every possible disaster, but you can predict the most likely possibilities, at least in broad-brush scenarios: accident, verbal attack, negative study or report, and so on. Identify the kinds of worst-case scenarios your locality might face and prepare for them, with the help of outside experts who can give candid feedback on potential scenarios, available facts, spokespersons to use, and responses to make.

What could happen? What fact-finding and decision-making process, and public position, would your organization take? Who inside your organization would be involved in approving that position? If your organization were in some way to be at fault, what mechanism or process would you have in place to ensure that your organization would maintain its stance of integrity and truthfulness? How could you set a process in place immediately for rectifying the situation, as compared with denying, avoiding, covering it up, or even lying about it?

**2. Get your facts, or the facts will get you.** How would your local government's key decisionmakers be placed in communication with each other quickly so they could be informed and make a joint decision? What is their advance standard of how fast they could commit to making a decision?

Would all of them be involved in the decisions about the financial commitments needed to back up decisions made? If not, who would be? Who inside and outside your organization would have the most reliable information most quickly, and how would you reach them most swiftly, should the situation require speed?

Who outside your organization should be contacted first to be informed of the organization's stance and action? Who inside your organization would inform whom, and how, and how fast? Who are your most powerful allies and critics, in general and in this kind of situation? Who could counter each critic? Who outside your organization would be most likely to comment on the crisis first (which reporters, food experts, consumer activists, government officials, etc.)?

What attitude would each of these people take (positive, neutral, or negative) toward your government's situation and later position? How knowledgeable and credible would they be? Who are your credible, current and potential outside advocates in these situations? How can you deepen their knowledge, support, and able advocacy of your organization in advance of such situations?

**3. Be vividly specific and compelling.** In general, what is the most vivid, specific, and accurate characterization of your community you would give in any discussion? Is it interesting and understandable to those outside the management profession? It is hard to be (1) interesting, (2) accurate, and (3) timely when you have an interest at stake (your community's reputation) and a committee (your colleagues in the organization) to decide on the final message for an ad. Think of the increased difficulty of being all three if you are facing the heat of a crisis.

When writing or speaking to gain attention and credibility, consider the best third-party sources of information—such as a news-gathering agency or a think tank or a trade association—and the briefest way to characterize their findings. Whenever you can, quote an impartial expert from one of these sources. Better yet, have a person practiced and prepared to respond, with you as an echo.

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eyes first.

Most adults, especially the more educated and those higher on the corporate totem pole, tend to talk in lengthy abstractions, full of terms of art and qualifiers, before they get to a point or respond to a question. If you find yourself speaking this way, turn your comments and answers upside down, and begin speaking in the “pyramid style” of good newspaper writing: all of the most important facts in your first sentence, with each subsequent sentence an elaboration, offering layers of supporting detail.

Use specific examples, contrasts, and details to make your quotes more quotable than an opponent’s. Speak English “like it tastes good.” Use the sensory, situational adjectives of full color, not gray, dry abstractions and wordy generalizations.

**4. Remember that verbal snapshots penetrate the mind and linger.** Speak in word pictures. Whoever most vividly characterizes a situation usually determines how others see it in their mind’s eye, think about it, discuss it with others, and eventually decide about it. Those much-maligned “sound bites” are not bad in themselves. They prove that you can get to the point quickly, and that you know what the point is. Worded without condescension, they can reflect a respect for the listener. They set people up to get interested in hearing more. They provide anchors by which people can remember your supporting points. They are “verbal snapshots” that penetrate the mind and the gut in an instant and then linger like bright after images.

**5. Be brief, to build rapport.** And brevity brings you other benefits even besides the great one of rapport. You are less likely to be misquoted. The interviewer stays engaged and feels comfortable because he or she feels in control in guiding the questions. You have more opportunities to complete your comments naturally with your short asides. You can put across the positive characterization you have expressed of your organization, received feedback on, and have practiced shortly after reading this article.

**6. Make unlikely allies before you need them.** If you haven’t yet done so, conduct a stakeholder analysis in which you and your associates in top management identify all of the key influencers who can alter people’s perceptions of your organization.

These influencers might include labor leaders, stock analysts, reporters (industry, business, lifestyle, consumers’, and other beats), civic and community leaders, vendors, customers, politicians, and activist groups. Then, match each key influencer with a key contact in your organization, ideally one who already has a relationship with that person that the influencer can maintain and nourish by offering genuine support for that person’s interests and for those they share, unrelated to your local government. A key contact system is your government’s best crisis insurance and a long-term investment that few entities have made.

Further, find friends and allies inside and outside the management profession who can be knowledgeable, alternative voices to yours. Inside the industry, look for credible experts or opinion leaders with constituencies either overlapping or apart from yours.

Outside the management profession, look for people who are respected and who have some connection with your organization or the people you serve. Consider the “rule of three” for reinforcing the reality and the perception of broad, diverse support: whenever two people who represent interests apparently much different from yours and who might not even look like you speak out similarly to you on an issue, the credibility and newsworthiness of your stand are multiplied.

**7. Be plain and clear.** Do not even wear patterns that might distract. To be heard and respected, avoid wearing any kind of pattern, especially on the upper half of your body. Patterns shorten the attention span of anyone looking at you, so they do not listen as long or remember as much. Other patterns of distraction are ambient or distinct background noises or voices or motions—yours or those of other people.

Attempt to speak in a place of visual and aural calmness. People do not have “earlids” to screen out noise and can get distracted. If others are moving around you, listeners will be less attentive to you.

If you walk or gesture quickly, you do not look assured or truthful. The more you move your body or your arms, the less people will be able to listen to you and find you credible. Avoid “hand dances.” Gestures that are high, fast, and frequent, especially above the waist, rob you of credibility. Use lower, slower, and fewer motions to illustrate a point. As with using a lower, slower, warmer voice, your gestures should follow the less-is-more principle.

**8. Look to you attackers’ positive intent, especially when they appear to have none.** One of the surest and most deserved ways to build credibility and respect is to display grace under pressure. Another person’s vigorous, personal attack against you, while uncomfortable in the short term, can actually be quite advantageous. Genuinely praise some specific action of the person who has criticized you. Because most attacks from critics are not a complete surprise, you usually do have some time in advance to anticipate that they might attack again.

Be specific, direct, and truthful. Find some part of the attacker’s current or past statements, actions, or motivations with which you can truthfully agree. In most cases, if you can’t do this, you are too entrenched in a narrow perspective against them and thus more vulnerable to counterattacks. This idea is akin to the concept of product positioning, that is, that you gain by positioning your positive comments in direct and vivid contrast to your opponent’s attack. Two statements are thus placed, like two products, side by side for close comparison.

**9. Be the first to say that you’re wrong when you are.** Say you are sorry. Say it soon. Prove you mean it. Say it in person, if at all possible. Say it first to the person or persons most damaged, no matter how much you’d rather avoid this uncomfortable situation. Otherwise, the situation will metaphorically stick to your feet like tarpaper, forever pulling people’s attention toward it and away from any good actions you might take later. You’ve made the taint potentially indelible, the stink longer-lasting.

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locality is in the wrong or has caused damage to others, the earlier and the more heartfelt the apology, the more sincerely and positively you and the community will be perceived.

### **Potential Statesmen/ Heroes Out of Ashes**

More than in any other kind of situation, in a crisis no ambiguity can exist about the steps you must take if you want your local government to enjoy future effectiveness. In those rare instances when you or your locality is in the wrong or has caused damage to others, the earlier and the more heartfelt the apology, the more sincerely and positively you and the community will be perceived, and the sooner the forgiveness can begin, especially if the apology is directly coupled with your explicit and adequate plan to rectify the matter.

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