

## **RISK AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

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*“You cannot talk your way out of a crisis.”*

– Tom Olshanski  
U.S. Fire Administration

Years ago I was introduced to the concept of PACE – primary plan, alternate plan, contingency plan and emergency plan. As we all know, no plan ever works completely as expected. But does that mean we should not plan at all?

The concept of PACE is to be able to adapt to changing conditions because sometimes events unfold differently than anticipated. This is when an alternate or contingency plan can be implemented. When all else fails the emergency plan is used.

Most tacticians would agree that no one should ever go into any situation without knowing first how to get out. However, is this possible in all cases? Can we always plan for a successful escape when things go wrong? What about those situations where something is going wrong but you don't know it yet? These are the surprises in life that no one likes or appreciates.

What this factors down to is risk management – the assessment, mitigation and response to identified and unidentified risks. Risk is what we observe or think may happen based on our best estimates and evaluations coupled with experience.

Risk is constant. Risk comes in many forms such as personal, financial, business, relationships, environmental and medical. Other risks include those events that can become a crisis. There is always risk and it can turn at a moment's notice. To quote the famous risk manager and humorist Gordon Graham, “If you can think of it, it can happen.”

Personal and institutional reputation is also a factor when accessing risk and potential for crises during an emergency or significant corporate event. This risk can quickly trump the emergency itself.

It is important to appreciate that risk can quickly translate into fear. Fully understanding risk and developing mitigation that is supported by a tested response plan can go a long way to reducing real and perceived fear.

One of Grahams' best examples of risk is that of an old VW driving on the freeway at 65 with a bed mattress tied to the roof flapping in the wind. Is there a chance of it blowing off? Of course. Is the risk preventable? Yes.

In contract, a crisis is when the mattress blows off onto the freeway causing a multi-car collision injuring people, damaging property and impacting on thousands of commuters.

Crisis is finite and concludes over a period of time. A crisis can come in many forms and perhaps more than one at a time, but they do end. How you manage a crisis frequently drives the longevity of an event.

Crisis has a nasty way of creating an additional crisis sometimes completely removed from the original event. Crisis within crisis frequently causes one to change or create new plans with little or no notice. On the operational side of emergency response this can turn into just doing what needs to be done based on experience, practical necessity and common sense.

Most crises do not remove the initial risk. For example, the risk of driving a car does not change because you were involved in a collision. While it is true you may drive slower, wear a seatbelt and pay better attention to your surroundings, the risk of another collision remains.

A crisis can come in three forms: Natural, human made and societal. In the world of emergency management natural crises includes fires, public unrest, criminal events, weather, earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis and extreme solar activity.

Human crisis has almost unlimited sources. Moreover, one crisis may not be another's crisis. Human crisis can also be self-made. Here, who has a plan and who does not becomes quickly evident.

Societal crisis is a growing concern throughout the world. Our society is experiencing profound change and stress. Even change in enviable ways as baby boomers begin to leave the work world and move into retirement. These changes may well cause further stress on our already strained society.

The three elements of crisis also apply to institutions, government and business. The rules of risk management apply here too. Further complicating the challenges that confront managers' and executives', internal crisis can quickly impact the general public. The loss of containment is one of the great fears within most organizations. Reputation and credibility is everything. The ramifications of not being prepared can be catastrophic.

Perception of risk is frequently based on past experience, education and awareness. Those who have lived through a wind driven wildfire or hurricane are much more apt to take precautions in the future than someone who has not.

Decades of experience have clearly demonstrated that communities, businesses and individuals do not typically anticipate emergencies. When they do, it is either to overreact or not react at all. This is frequently governed by how the media (typically television) portrays an event. The type of coverage will frequently affect response.

During any crisis impacting the community the public has three information priorities: What happened or is happening, what does it mean to me and what is being done about it? While these are seemingly simple and understandable demands, the process in meeting the demand can be daunting.

The role of media is to report. It is also to make money like any other business. What do you suppose makes money for television news – high action events with dynamic video or reading the stock reports? How about newspapers, radio and magazines?

Media includes radio, print, television and the ever expanding digital world. While it is true media wants to report the news in a dramatic way they also have an institutional interest in being a public servant by supporting the mission and message of public safety.

How the media portrays an event can significantly impact how the public may respond. The media can also create a crisis from an otherwise benign event. For example, a storm warning from the weather service can be presented in many ways. An alarmist newscaster can make a simple rain storm sound like a Category 5 hurricane

The interaction between media and public safety is the job of the Public Information Officer (PIO). Over the years this position has become more complex; consequently the term is becoming obsolete. Today's PIO is more apt to be called the External Affairs Officer within many organizations, particularly at the federal level.

Many organizations utilize their PIO to help identify real and perceived risks. The PIO not only provides information but collects it. They can be used to identify unique or special needs audiences. They may establish agency and event messages.

As the function has grown many PIO's have also become subject matter experts. This gives the public a better understanding of what is occurring because the messenger truly understands the message as well as the situation.

The ongoing evaluation of the entire information exchange process keeps the information system functioning. It is essential that the effectiveness of crisis messaging is evaluated. This includes reviewing the limitations that media and public safety experience during the response and recovery phase.

We all have risks. Some risk may be good because it keeps us alert and paying attention. However, because identified risks can become a crisis, it is paramount that plans are developed.

Locally, the PIO group Emergency Public Information Communicators (EPIC) has expanded training and drilling to improve skills. Twelve local PIO's have or will be attending the Advanced Public Information Officer course at FEMA's Emergency Management Institute in Emmetsburg, Maryland. This additional networking is helping build a strong information system for Santa Barbara.

Advanced training and public education is also a prevention process. The better we all know and understand how emergency situations are handled the less fear, mistrust and frustration will occur when we are impacted by an emergency. In other words, an emergency does not have to become a crisis.

In an emergency, your plan may not be the action you take but it will serve as a baseline from which your secondary plan will take hold. An emergency does not have to be a crisis.

As I have said many times in the past, hope is not a plan. Having nothing whatsoever is not wise. Why wait? Start your risk assessments for what could happen to you, your family, your business and your community because you cannot talk your way out of a crisis.