



RISK & CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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

– Tom Olshanski
FEMA

The United State Marine Corps has a term called PACE – Primary plan, Alternate plan, Contingency plan and Emergency plan. No plan ever works completely as expected, but does that mean we should not plan at all or that we should have multiple plans?

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. In theory, when a plan does not go as expected, we adjust to the conditions in real time. In reality, when there is a curve ball or unexpected event, it often throws us off our game. Our usually sharp problem solving skills may be slowed or off target. Alternate or contingency plans minimize potential negative impacts of a situation.

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.

This is the realm of risk management – the assessment, mitigation and response to identified and unidentified risks. Risk is about potential loss and what can go wrong, based on our best estimates and evaluations coupled with experience. Life is full of potential benefits accompanied by potential risks.

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 reputations are risks that can affect a current emergency or significant corporate event as well as have long-term impacts. These risks can quickly trump the emergency itself.

It is important to appreciate that people can see risks and quickly become overcome by 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 contrast, 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 unexpected, creates uncertainty and it is seen as a threat. It is finite and concludes over a period of time. A crisis can come in many forms and more than one crisis can occur at a time. How a crisis is managed frequently drives the intensity and longevity of an event.

One crisis event has a nasty way of creating additional crisis sometimes completely removed from the original event. Multiple unexpected, threatening situations frequently cause one to change or create new plans on the fly with little or no preparations. 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 risks. For example, the risks associated with driving a car are not eliminated 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, these things minimize some risks, yet 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 crisis includes fires, weather, earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis and extreme solar activity.

Human crisis has almost unlimited sources. What is a crisis for one person may not be another's crisis based on the level of perceived threat and personal response. A death in the family, loss of a job, serious injury, and loss of one's home are examples of individual human crisis. Large scale human crisis can include war, famine, disease, flooding and fire. Here who has a plan and who does not becomes quickly evident.



Societal crisis is a growing concern or threat throughout the world. Our society is experiencing profound changes and stresses. Change in enviable 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. When a concern becomes a crisis, it is perceived as a threat or emergency that demands resolution. The same situation may be a concern to one person and a crisis to another person.

The three forms of crisis, natural, human made and societal apply to institutions, government and business. The rules of risk management apply here too. Further complicating the challenges that confront managers and executives is that internal crisis can quickly impact the general public.

The loss of containment of a crisis 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 greatly influenced by past experience, education and awareness. Those who have lived through a wind driven wildfire or hurricane for example are much more apt to take precautions for these types of events in the future than someone who has not had a personal experience.

Decades of experience has clearly demonstrated that communities, businesses and individuals do not typically anticipate emergencies. When they do experience an emergency, it is often by over reacting or not reacting at all. This is frequently governed by how the media (typically television) portrays an event. The type of media coverage and personal exposure will frequently affect response.

Good communication and relevant information can significantly reduce risks, threats and additional crisis. 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. Communicating in a manner that meets these three priority information needs is essential during a crisis.

Media includes radio, print, television and the ever expanding digital world. The roles of media are to report, share information, provide perspectives and various views on life. Media outlets are also businesses and as such it is essential that they 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?

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. At times, the roles of making money and providing a message of public safety do not lead to the same approach.

How the media portrays an event can significantly impact how the public may responds. 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. Solid reliable information communicated clearly makes a difference.

The relationship 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 collects information, presents it in a concise and clear way, and provides the information to those who need to know. The PIO presents the information in context, in a manner that can be understood and heard by a target audience. They can be used to identify unique or special needs audiences and tailor messages for those 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. This is why many fire departments use trained fire fighters to be PIO's. They truly understand the subject matter and communicate it clearly.

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 impacts and limitations that media and public safety experiences during the response and recovery phase.

We all have risks. Some risk may be good because it keeps us alert and paying attention to things that can matter. However, because identified risks can become a crisis, it is paramount that plans are developed. In a similar way, good communication strategies and skilled PIO's can minimize expansion of threats and complexity during crisis.

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 that will occur when we are impacted by an emergency. An emergency is an immediate risk to life or property. Armed with knowledge and training, an emergency does not have to become a number of increasing crisis events.

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. Planning coupled with clear, relevant and timely information in an emergency is vital because an emergency does not have to be a crisis.