

Training Managers to Handle a Crisis

by Michael Bland

Introduction

A crisis, like Dr Johnson's public hanging, concentrates the mind wonderfully. From Pan Am to Perrier, Thalidomide to Tylenol, the consequences of the effective or incompetent handling of a crisis have been paraded in front of every manager via the media.

The "physical" handling – e.g. recalling a product, stopping a production line, compensating victims – is precarious enough but the company or organisation's handling of its communications can be far more crucial. Yet it is the area often given least attention.

So when a company has a heavily publicised crisis the "It could be us next" response triggers off a flurry of much overdue activity in others. A senior manager in PR, Safety or Human Resources is deputed to prepare a crisis manual and arrange some media training for key spokespeople.

Few of these plans actually see the light of day. Just as an inveterate bad driver will take more care for the first few days after an accident before slipping back into his old ways, so the crisis-aware company will quietly forget the half-finished crisis programme once the initial scare has subsided.

And those plans and training programmes that do see the light of day quickly gather dust on the shelf and are out of date when a crisis actually strikes.

A New Approach

Over the years I have learned that the best way to prepare a company or organisation for a crisis is to start with the training and then to work backwards to the development of a manual.

Why this back-to-front approach?

One reason is that successful crisis management calls for an understanding of the psychologies involved – and you can't learn psychology from a manual. Every member of the crisis team must instinctively understand what it is like on the other side of the fence – for a frightened consumer or local resident, a distraught relative, a concerned employee, an angry customer, an opportunistic politician, a fanatical pressure group...

...and when you know how they are feeling you base your communications on what they need to hear, not on what you want to communicate.

Another good reason is that a crisis is more like a rugby match than a corporate procedure. It starts with a bang (sometimes literally), information is scarce, 'phones ring, bosses demand to know, adrenalin flows, some lose their nerve, key managers can't be found...and then the first call from the press comes in – with much the same effect as the first Gary Owen in a big match.

But if you want a rugby team to perform you don't give them a detailed manual, tell them to study it and expect them to know how to respond to every eventuality. By its very nature crisis is chaotic. You cannot cover every contingency. And the more you set things in stone (some crisis manuals are longer than "War and Peace") the more damage it does because a) people don't have time to read it, b) if they do they can't remember it, c) it starts to get out of date in weeks and d) complacency sets in ("It's all in the manual so we don't have to worry").

To continue the rugby analogy: in a successful modern team each member knows how to play, what his colleagues are capable of, and roughly what to expect. But then there has to be a high degree of flexibility, with each team member able to fill in for the others.

Ditto with training and developing a crisis team. Rather than focusing on fixed responsibilities I tell each team member to train and prepare on the assumption that when the dreaded call comes it is in the middle of the night, on a bank holiday...and he/she is the only person available and must handle the whole thing alone.

So, a typical development programme to prepare an organisation for a major crisis or issue would be:

- **Theoretical Training:** This gets management thinking about crisis and the psychologies involved. They can agree on a common definition of crisis and be presented with the many questions that will form the skeleton of the crisis plan.

- **Brainstorming:** The now crisis-aware management can thrash out the many different crises which could hit them – and how they would respond. Here a “planning by question” approach works well. By asking themselves a set of questions – e.g. “What types of crisis could hit us? Who would the audiences be? How would they react? How do we communicate with them? What would the messages be? – and coming up with the answers the team can develop a logical plan.
- **Planning:** Any written plans are now drawn up – usually in the form of a crisis manual.
- **Media Training:** Any media spokespeople must be trained in crisis interview techniques.
- **Simulations:** Crisis simulations are a useful way of assessing the team’s strengths and weaknesses, and keeping them crisis-aware.
- **Audits:** A “crisis auditor” should drop in on individual team members unannounced and check their top-of-the-head knowledge of crisis procedures. He/she should also check that changeable data in the manual (e.g. team members, telephone numbers etc) is kept up to date.

Selling the Training

The first challenge thrown up by this approach is how to persuade a management to start with a training course when they have already committed to preparing a plan first? Indeed, many already have a plan in place, in the form of a huge manual, and the brief is to help them train around it and make sure it works.

Fortunately some organisations quickly grasp the concept of the new approach and are prepared to try it. Other have to be lured into the training in the belief that it fits in with their preconceived requirement. So the “training” is offered as, for example, media training to help them face the cameras or a course in how to implement the manual, etc.

The next challenge is to face a roomful of managers who a) don’t want to be there as they have more important things to do, b) don’t see why it should be a whole day when they just want a couple of hours’ grooming for the cameras, and c) are not going to be terribly pleased if they get wind that they are about to be persuaded to shred the old manual and start over again on a longer and more demanding preparation process. Some

mornings I feel like a therapist facing a new patient who has come for a quick fix in one session when you know that it's going to take two years!

The Awareness Course

Much hinges on this introductory day. So it has to be good. The ingredients of a successful course will be well known to readers of "Industrial and Commercial Training": involvement, self-learning, anecdotal material, practical work, team competition, structure...and enjoyment.

Most crisis courses start with handling the media (and many go no further) but I have found over the years that the best approach is to start with a general analysis – called "Anatomy of Crisis" and work towards a crescendo of Paxman-style television interviews at the end.

So in the first session delegates are invited to call out the names of well known crises and I write them on a board (loads of names, so plenty of space is needed – at least three flip charts but preferably a large whiteboard or blackboard).

I put the names of the crises into similar groups. For example, someone may call out "The M1 air crash", which I then bracket with "Lockerbie". "Tylenol" is paired or grouped with "Perrier", and so on, so that in the next stage delegates are asked to analyse why the outcomes of similar crises were so different. For example, Pan Am's silence after Lockerbie lost it a huge chunk of market share and the company subsequently went out of business. British Midland Airways spoke up immediately after Kegworth and retained public confidence.

Thus the delegates are having to do a maximum of thinking from the outset. They are also starting to gel as a group and, most importantly, they are discovering for themselves the lessons to be learnt from other peoples' crises.

I learnt this approach the hard way. It was on an overcrowded PR course on a baking hot summers' day in a room in central London with no air conditioning. The course organisers felt it necessary to provide delegates with a solid meal and wine at lunchtime...and guess who had the afternoon slot on the riveting topic of "How to Organise a Press Conference". I used to fancy myself as an entertaining speaker but by the end of the one hour talk there was barely an open eye in the room.

So the next time, I gave the delegates details of a mythical product and a few guidelines before lunch – followed by the first half hour after lunch working in groups and coming up with solutions, which were then reported back in the form of a group competition.

With my initial help and their own swapping of experience they had by now learnt about two thirds of the subject – and were wide awake and at peak effort because each group wanted to win the competition. I then filled in any gaps in their knowledge during the appraisal of their presentations.

This approach works particularly well with the crisis course. After the initial “Anatomy” session the delegates are provided with the bare-bones guidelines for preparing for and handling a crisis – and are then broken into groups before lunch, with each group receiving a different scenario to work on over an extended lunch period (no alcohol). It is important to provide each delegate with clear written instructions on: what their group is expected to achieve, the need to appoint a team leader from the outset, selecting spokespeople and their roles, etc.

“Seeding” the members of groups is a popular preoccupation in many organisations – but my own experience has been that it doesn’t make much difference. If you try to disperse the more senior, or more assertive, or more experienced delegates among the groups then they tend to hog the show in their different groups but if you pool them together then there is the danger of them forming a “super group.” Random grouping (e.g. as they sit) seems to produce just as good a result as trying to pick the teams in advance.

After lunch the team leaders or spokespeople report back after reading out their scenarios. These scenarios are carefully devised to throw in plenty of the dilemmas that face a crisis team in real life. And they are “unsolvable” in that there is no obviously single right approach. This ensures that by mid afternoon every delegate not only understands the general principles but he or she also realises that there are no simple answers. The idea of coming in tomorrow morning and starting by binning the official crisis manual is taking root...

Once the groups have selected a winner (a bottle of champagne at close of day) it is time to move on to guidelines for handling the media, followed by a spokesperson from each group giving a demonstration no-holds-barred TV interview on the subject of the group’s scenario in front of the other delegates.

It is important for this exercise to be conducted in the spirit of enjoyment and good humoured badinage which should by now be pervading the delegates. That way the interviews can be realistically hard-hitting without the spokespeople feeling intimidated.

I have run many scores of these courses and the feedback has been most encouraging. As well as teaching the subject they encourage the relevant managers to re-think their crisis programme in line with a new approach which, before the course, was completely alien to their way of doing things.

Summary

- Crisis management is a particularly difficult and demanding subject to teach as there are many grey areas and the best approach is radically different from the accepted way of doing things.
- The initial one day course is crucial to effecting the change. But to get senior managers to attend often requires some sleight of hand.
- A successful training course should contain elements of:
 - Involvement
 - Self learning
 - Anecdotal material
 - Practical work
 - Team competition
 - Structure
 - Enjoyment

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