Guidelines for Developing a Crisis Management Plan

A crisis management plan is designed to provide guidelines for a practical communications system that is adaptable for any crisis situation. It should be a working document – continually updated as the industry, the world and your agency changes. The crisis management plan should provide for information sharing between national, state and local organizations within 24 hours, subject to confidentiality limitations.

Items to have ready in case of crisis:

- Media and public relations policy
- Crisis communication action plan
- Fact sheet about your CASA/GAL program
- Fact sheet about state organization
- CASA/GAL key messages
- Any information on potential crisis situations
- Key contact list
- Designated spokesperson and designated media contact
- Media list
- Media contact log

The following will provide a model for developing a crisis management plan and will outline procedures to follow in a crisis situation.

Getting Started

A crisis management plan should be part of an overall safety and emergency preparedness plan and a standard part of your overall strategic planning process.
As important as dealing with any emergency situation is dealing with perceptions – what the public thinks happened. This should be planned in the same way you would plan for damage to property or injuries to people. Planning for perception will also protect your agency's image/credibility and its ability to recover after a crisis.

The following will give you some easy to remember guidelines on getting started with your crisis management plan:

- ***Predict*** – Anticipate everything that could go wrong with your agency. Identify the issues.
- ***Position*** – Decide what your position will be on these issues.
- ***Prevent*** – Take preventive measures.
- ***Plan*** – In case prevention doesn't work, prepare a plan for dealing with the crisis.
- ***Persevere*** – Follow your plan and stick to the positions you have taken. See the crisis through in a thorough and professional manner.
- ***Evaluate*** – If the plan is enacted, review the results to determine if there are other steps that can be taken to prevent the crisis from happening again.

These steps will help get your crisis management plan started and keep it vital and updated as your surroundings change.

Issue Identification
Identifying issues is an ongoing process. The crisis team should identify every imaginable issue and list them, starting with the most likely to happen. Crisis issues can generally be put in two categories – manmade or natural. Manmade issues include violence, vandalism, accidents, operator error, negligence, defective equipment, poor planning and scheduling, strikes, fire, and illness such as food poisoning. Natural issues include things such as weather, earthquakes and communicable disease.

Crisis Team
There are many steps in the development and implementation of a crisis management plan. The establishment of a crisis team is your first step. The team prepares the plan and meets regularly to update and test it. If a crisis occurs, this team will be prepared and in control. A crisis team should include top management, operations personnel, public relations experts, legal assistance and insurance carriers. This list will vary from agency to agency and from crisis to crisis, but be sure to identify those who can feed into the process.

Smaller agencies that do not necessarily have the resources or personnel to form a crisis team can still utilize this process to prepare for a crisis situation. The director can be their own team, following the same review and issue identification process listed above. It would be suggested that a list of advisors or professionals – such as attorneys, insurance agents, etc. – be made. These people can be called on for their particular expertise not only during the planning stage but also if a crisis should occur. Having the benefit of a large crisis team is nice, but it is not an absolute necessity in being prepared for the unknown. The team, regardless of size, will be responsible for identifying all audiences that may be affected by each crisis situation. They can also designate contacts to gain specific information on each situation as needed. The crisis team is charged with identifying various scenarios that could adversely affect the agency and developing a model or plan to follow in each. Prepared media statements, press releases, notification lists and other materials will help keep a crisis situation under control and calm the person who must deal with the situation.

Policy Preparation
When preparing policy statements, the following general principles can help:

- When responding to a crisis situation, the response should be honest, timely and direct. Having a prepared, approved and distributed policy document will help you resist the temptation to say “no comment” or have your agency appear uncooperative or secretive during a crisis situation.
- Incorporate your ethical standards into the policy. Do the right thing, being fair to all parties to the best of your ability.
- Think now about how your business practices will be interpreted by the media during an emergency. In addition to specific policy statements, it is important to have background information on your agency available. It is your responsibility and in your best interest to provide current, complete information.

Preparing Specific Responses
After issues have been identified, specific responses for each should be prepared. Consider the following checklist when drafting position statements:

- Define the scope of the crisis – local, regional, national or international.
- Establish a unified response – one spokesperson, one person established to distribute statements to the media, etc.
- Keep the message simple, clear, consistent and tailored to each audience.

Understand that the media wants to know three things: what happened, why did it happen and what are you going to do to make sure that it never happens again? If you understand the media's psyche, you are on your way to finding a solution to the problem.

Once position statements have been prepared for each issue identified by the crisis team, include them in your overall crisis management document. In addition, prepare sample press releases for each issue in advance. It will be much easier to modify an existing, approved release than to start from scratch in the middle of a crisis.

In addition to the policy statements and press releases, anticipate questions that will be asked by the media. List the questions with developed answers that the crisis team is comfortable with and continually update the list as new questions are identified.

Crisis team members should each know their roles. Clearly identify job assignments and responsibilities and let those who will serve as spokespeople know so they can be prepared to jump into action should the need arise. Team members should have immediate access to each other at all times in the event of a crisis. Finally, the news media must be briefed on a regular basis. All phone calls from the media must be answered quickly and completely. Keep media logs listing the date and time, source, reporter, phone number and the questions. Stick to your core message and deliver that message to everyone.

Post-Crisis Review
As mentioned before, the crisis management process does not end once a crisis has occurred and been resolved. Each situation should be carefully evaluated. Look at the media coverage received, the resulting image of your agency, short- and long-term programs to rebuild image and review position statements for relevance and necessary revisions.

Only after a crisis management plan has been put to the test can the crisis team evaluate its effectiveness. If a agency has been lucky enough not to have a crisis situation in which to test its plan, it should be constantly monitored to make sure the position statements are still relevant and no new issues have arisen. A crisis management plan should be a living document, undergoing constant evaluation and updates.