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Crisis

Having a crisis communications plan in place allows you to focus on the crisis, not the potential communications fall-out.

It seemed like a miracle. On January 3, 2006, 24 hours after an explosion racked the Sago Mine near Sago, West Virginia, word spread throughout the town and across North America that 12 miners had been found alive. For three hours the miners' families, friends and neighbours celebrated, only to find out that a horrible mistake had been made. Yes, the miners had been found, and all but one were dead.

The cause of this error? The mine operator, International Coal Group (ICG), did not have a crisis communication plan to control the flood of information being generated at the disaster site. Unsubstantiated information had leaked out of the rescue command centre, and even though mine officials knew the truth they did not know how to correct it.

A subsequent government inquiry condemned mining officials for this oversight. "Little effort seems to have been made to keep critical information within [the command centre's] walls... [This would] not have happened if the news had been kept confidential until it was confirmed."

The government was not the only source of criticism; ICG's reputation in the community of Sago was shattered. "When you make a terrible mistake you don't wait three and a half hours to correct it," said one resident. "It was like someone came up and punched you in the stomach after taking away something you had just been given."

It's no surprise that incorrect information and rumours can develop during a crisis. "When a critical injury or fatality occurs you're scrambling to figure out what you should say, and what you shouldn't say," says Holly-Ann Campbell, IAPA's manager of Corporate Communications. "If you're not prepared, this creates more chaos during the crisis."

The consequences of handling this information improperly can be severe:

- disrupted emergency response
- damaged public reputation
- psychological stress for employees, and
- delayed business recovery after the crisis.

Despite these consequences, many companies don't have a crisis communications plan in place. A March 2006 survey by the International Association of Business Communicators revealed that one-third of companies doesn't have a formal communications plan to deal with disasters and other crises.

Even though crises like 9/11 and SARS have prompted companies to look at their emergency response procedures, few appreciate how a disaster can handicap corporate communications. Why? Some companies consider corporate communications secondary to an emergency response plan.

Not so, says Campbell. "Under normal circumstances corporate communications informs, educates and raises internal and external awareness of what the organization is doing," she explains. "When a crisis occurs, corporate communications becomes that much more critical. Instead of being reactive, corporate communications provides information strategically; it can be a vehicle to deliver news in a way that's helpful to staff and other parts of the community who are expecting it."

As with all aspects of emergency response, effective crisis communication depends on planning and preparation. Shirley Hlickman, founder of Threads of Life, believes that having an established, documented, and tested crisis communications plan will determine whether a company's reputation survives a critical incident. Threads of Life is a not-for-profit organization that supports



BY CYRUS GORDON

families affected by a life-altering workplace injury or illness.

"When I talk to employers about [a crisis communications plan]," says Hickman, "I tell them that it needs to be a living, breathing document. They need to know who's going to respond, what's supposed to be done, and who's supposed to do it."

While a crisis communications plan cannot "undo" an incident, it can help an organization work through a crisis by

- ensuring that key internal and external stakeholders receive accurate information as soon as possible
- de-escalating heightened emotions and anxiety during the emergency
- evaluating the accuracy of information as it becomes available
- demonstrating a company's commitment to OHS and proper emergency response
- providing emotional support to employees, community and family

affected by the crisis, and

- advocating for workplace safety and health in the rebuilding process.

Read on to learn more about establishing a crisis communications plan.

Building a team

An internal crisis communications team is the key ingredient that will make your crisis communications plan work. The team manages corporate communications during a crisis and makes sure that staff, the media and the community receive timely and accurate information. Usually the core members of the crisis communications team are the

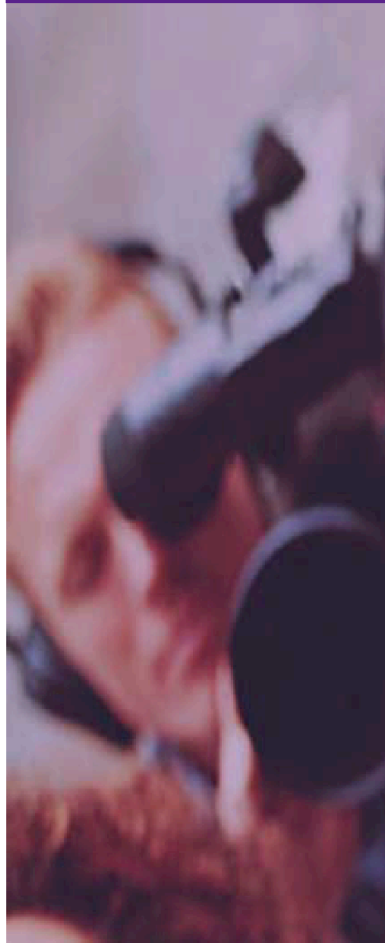
- president, CEO or business owner
- person responsible for site operations
- safety and/or security officer
- person in charge of the area involved in the incident
- legal counsel for the organization, and
- head of communications and public relations.

For smaller companies, especially those without a communications department, developing a crisis communications plan may seem overwhelming. However, the process can be managed just as effectively because senior staff are often used to handling multiple responsibilities, and may know who among the workforce has expertise or leadership skills to contribute. Asking for input from workers can give them a sense of ownership and help to rally support if an incident occurs.

Once a team has been assembled, ensure before a crisis strikes that each member understands his or her specific responsibilities. For example, the head of communications could be responsible for developing key messages for media announcements while the safety officer would evaluate any technical information gathered during the crisis.

Take special consideration when selecting the team spokesperson: the member(s) of the team who will be responsible for

Dealing with Affected Families



Shirley Hickman is blunt about the way information has been delivered to Canadian families after a serious workplace incident. "I doubt anybody thinks that they were properly dealt with [during a crisis]," she says. "I think that even many companies with emergency policies don't know how to communicate information during a crisis."

Shirley knows this all too well. Her son, Timothy, was severely burned in a 1996 gas explosion while working at a municipal arena in London, Ontario. He died from his injuries 10 days later.

During those 10 days Shirley found herself at the centre of the storm of activity that occurs after most serious workplace injuries. She and her family received a flood of medical updates from hospital staff, accident reports from the enforcement authorities, and requests from journalists for statements. They were also bombarded by daily media coverage of the incident and her son's injuries. "I was surrounded by people providing information and asking for information," she recalls. "I didn't know where to turn..."

Shirley's personal experience inspired her to help form Threads of Life, a support association helping families and friends who have suffered a workplace tragedy. As a workplace health and safety advocate, Shirley has become an authority on the emotional dynamics surrounding workplace critical injuries and fatalities. Her suggestions below can help workplaces better respond to and manage psychological trauma during and after a crisis.

1. Establish a communication link with the family as soon as possible. Contact the family about the incident after the crisis communication team has assessed the situation and devised an action plan. This will ensure the family has accurate information and is aware that you are handling the emergency responsibly. "The worst thing that an employer can do is leave the family to others, such as the MOL [Ministry of Labour] and police," stresses Shirley. "When that happens the family becomes bitter towards the employer before they even know the facts."

Make notifying the victim's family about new developments a top priority for the communications team. "Whether it's good or bad news," Shirley explains, "the family must be first to know the whole way through." Consequently, she recommends assigning this responsibility to one member of the crisis communications team. Hickman also recommends that this person provides his/her contact information to the family, "so that the family always knows who to call."

issuing statements to the media and the public. A comprehensive understanding of company operations, workplace safety and health legislation, and emergency response procedures are crucial requirements.

In addition to being technically qualified, spokespersons must be trusted and reliable members of the organization for their message to have credibility. "You want them to be leaders, not machines," says Campbell. "They'll need to demonstrate strength and compassion at the same time, whether they're talking to the media or to their staff."

Hickman agrees, and advises that the spokespersons be prepared to deal with the emotional stress experienced by coworkers and family members of accident victims. "It's important for them to realize that they will be dealing with people in crisis, families with high emotional needs, employees who are angry," says Hickman. "So hopefully

Executive Briefing

Poor crisis communications during a workplace emergency can cause unnecessary suffering, compromise your corporate reputation, and delay the resumption of business. Follow these 10 tips:

- Assemble a crisis communications team.
- Work with OHS staff and the joint health and safety committee to identify potential crisis scenarios, their impact on corporate communications, and effective communication solutions.
- Compile a crisis contact roster to identify and prioritize internal and external stakeholders who must be called when a crisis occurs.
- Media train the crisis communications team to understand media requirements and expectations, as well as the types of messages that should or shouldn't be sent out to the media. Include media policies and procedures in the communications plan.
- Work with human resources to document available employee assistance program counselling services or other community services.
- Prepare key statements about your organization beforehand.
- Provide scripted messages to frontline staff.
- Establish lines of communication and develop relationships with the community, the media and your own employees before a crisis happens.
- Conduct practice drills to test the communication plan's effectiveness. Update it as needed.
- Don't wait. If you don't have a crisis communications plan, start one now.

Dealing with Affected Families *continued*

2. Build compassion into crisis communications. Proactive crisis communications is an excellent vehicle for providing a family with continuous support, whether it's information about services available through an employee assistance program, support with media interviews, or practical assistance with childcare or transportation.

"Don't wait for the family to ask for help," advises Shirley. "Ask the family what they need, and communicate those needs to the company."

Know what support services are available when you create your communications plan. "All of that has to be thought out in advance," Shirley explains. "You don't want a company representative to say one thing and then go back and be told [by the employer] 'No, we can't do that.'"

3. Manage the flow of information. During a crisis the communications team must screen new information while maintaining a sense of openness and transparency. This means not withholding critical information, and not avoiding tough questions.

"It's best to get all the workers in for a meeting and share all of the information," says Shirley. "If information cannot be released because it's under legal review or still being investigated, explain this to them. If you're honest, information won't be distorted as it goes through the workplace or the community."

Shirley believes that getting employees onside during a crisis ensures the integrity of communications response and protects families from further stress. "If you establish trust [your workers] will be more likely to cooperate as opposed to feeling that they have to tell their side of the story."

4. After the crisis passes, establish a legacy. Shirley is frank about the permanent scars left after a workplace fatality. "When you lose someone in an accident or if they are killed in the workplace, life moves forward but there's no such thing as closure."

There are a number of ways a company can recognize the positive legacy of a worker's life. "They can talk about who this person was, the loss to the family and the loss to the community, and how valued this person was as a worker." For example, in 2005 the City of London, CUPE locals 107 and 101 sponsored the Tim Hickman Memorial Health and Safety Scholarship for students enrolled in a post-secondary occupational or public health and safety program. Even modest gestures can have a significant emotional impact. "It can be something as simple as sending a card or making a phone call to say, 'We're thinking of your family right now.'"

Shirley Hickman acknowledges the practical benefits of good crisis communications. "The psychological and economic benefits go hand-in-hand," she explains. "It reduces the psychological problems and absenteeism rates that go with extreme emotional stress." However, for these benefits to be realized, crisis communications must deliver emotional support to families. "When you are talking about a critical incident or a fatality, you're not just talking about one family, you're talking about the families of all the coworkers," explains Shirley. "They're watching how the company is responding to the family of the worker because it could have been them, and their families."



these spokespersons will be able to handle anger and to realize that it isn't necessarily directed at them but at the situation. Even if the anger is directed at them, hopefully they are big enough to take it."

Adding communications to the emergency plan

Approach crisis communication planning not as a communications exercise, but as an essential part of emergency organization. "While the communications department will drive the development

Combine a crisis communications drill with emergency response exercises. The drill will help identify weaknesses in the communications plan as well as enhance the profile of the plan within the organization.

of your crisis communications plan," says Campbell, "it's really important that the plan becomes embedded into your emergency response system."

By working with OHS staff and the joint health and safety committee, the crisis communications team can identify potential crisis scenarios, their impact on corporate communications, and effective communication solutions. For example, if a chemical spill could result in the evacuation of the plant facility, the team can source alternative locations for media and staff briefings and backup communications vehicles, such as staff telephone conferences and web-page bulletins.

Remember, the faster a crisis communications plan goes into effect, the faster the organization can provide effective messages to staff and the community. Compile a crisis contact roster to identify and prioritize internal and external stakeholders who must be called when a crisis occurs. "As soon as something happens, you'll know who to call first, who to call second," says Campbell. A comprehensive roster includes home phone, cell phone and pager numbers for

internal contacts, such as:

- communications crisis team members
- department managers
- president/CEO
- board of directors, and
- safety committee members, and external contacts, such as:
- families of injured workers
- legal counsel
- key customers and suppliers
- government agencies (e.g., Ministry of Labour, workers compensation board)
- emergency services, and
- media.

"Media train" the crisis communications team to understand media requirements and expectations, as well as the types of messages that should or shouldn't be sent out to the media. Add media policies and procedures to the plan, addressing:

- the location of a media centre
- how the media will obtain photos and access to the facility, and
- how to manage the interview process.

Preparing for psychological side-effects

Delivering information effectively to staff after a coworker has been critically injured or killed involves appreciating the psychological impact of workplace incidents. "Even if you didn't witness an incident," says Campbell, "finding out that a coworker has been seriously injured or killed can bring out all types of reactions: fear of returning to the workplace, sense of loss, or anger towards the company for letting the incident happen."

Consequently, ensure the crisis communications team works with human resources to document employee assistance program counselling and other services. "Making employees aware that these services are there for them is an important part of a crisis communications plan," says Shirley Hickman. "It's important to ensure that you have enough services onsite for staff if professional counselling assistance is required."

Developing your message

Prepare key statements about your organization beforehand. When a crisis occurs, these statements will help you assemble communications more quickly, and reinforce your company's reputation. These messages may include:

- statements about the organization's

commitment to health and safety

- background information about the company
- the number of employees who received health and safety training in the past year, and
- the company's willingness to cooperate with media, family members of injured workers, and regulatory enforcement officials.

Depending on the situation, these statements may require modification. However, having them at the ready will help your crisis communications team hit

Spokespersons must be trusted and reliable members of the organization for their message to have credibility. "You want them to be leaders, not machines," says IAPA's Holly-Ann Campbell.

the ground running.

Be aware that during a crisis, the media and other members of the community will likely contact frontline staff instead of the communications team for information. Providing scripted messages to receptionists, call centre workers and other frontline staff responsible for directing external inquiries to the communications team will reduce stress for these staff members and the risk of spreading misinformation. "These messages should be succinct, polite, and advise the caller that the spokesperson is the best person to speak with," says Campbell.

Establishing relationships beforehand

Campbell believes that crisis communications planning is not just about documenting contact information and procedures. "It's an ongoing process," she explains. "It's about establishing lines of communication and developing relationships with the community, the media and your own employees before a crisis happens."

Crisis communications doesn't have to be a solo venture. Your lawyer, local media, safety associations, and emergency

organizations can serve as communication partners. If they are familiar with your company under normal operating circumstances, they will trust statements by your company should a critical incident occur. It will also make crisis communications that much more efficient as these partners won't have to be briefed about your company. Establish this positive relationship by

- conducting plant tours for legal counsel and the media
- publicizing any new business developments, and
- demonstrating your commitment to workplace health and safety by participating in community safety initiatives such as the WSIB Safety Groups campaign.

Testing and reviewing the plan

As with other aspects of emergency response, conduct practice drills to test the effectiveness of the crisis communications plan. "Practice, practice, practice," says Campbell. "A drill will ensure that everybody knows where they're supposed to be and what they are supposed to be doing." To ensure maximum effectiveness, combine the crisis communications drill with emergency response exercises. The drill will help identify weaknesses

in the communications plan as well as enhance the profile of the plan within the organization.

In addition to testing the plan, review the contents regularly to ensure that they reflect the current operating environment, that the contact roster is up to date, and that key members have received the required training.

Campbell concedes that crisis communications is one of the biggest challenges an organization can face. "Managing communication responsibilities in the midst of an emergency can be a lot of pressure." However, effective communications will ensure that employees, their families and the community know that you are responding to an emergency effectively and with a sense of social responsibility.

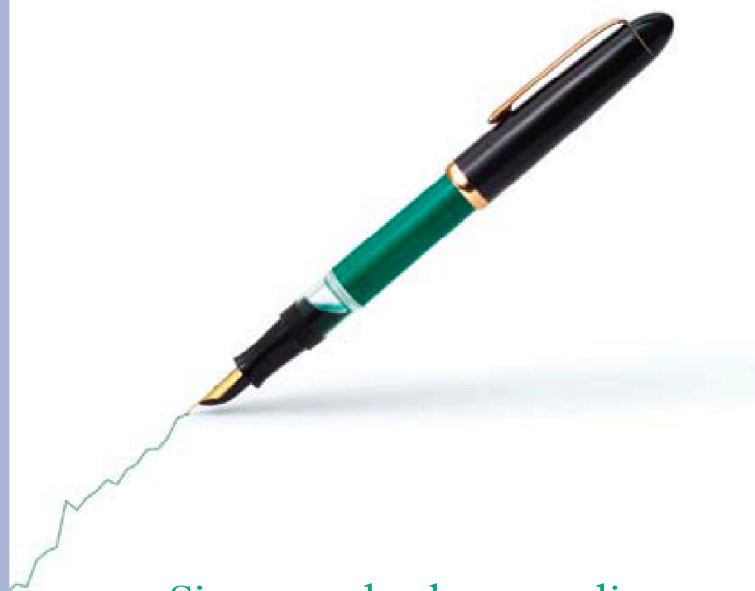
As Shirley Hickman points out, don't underestimate what this will mean to your business. "If you have plans in place to take care of your workers during a crisis, the company is not only protecting its greatest asset, the workers, but it's also ensuring the overall sustainability of the company by protecting its integrity within the business community."

Cyrus Gordon is an information resources consultant at IAPA's Information Centre. His most recent contribution to Accident Prevention was "Carried Away," March/April 2006.

Crisis Communications Checklist

Effective crisis communication is a crucial factor in determining whether your company survives a major emergency. Is your company ready to handle a crisis? Use this checklist to see if your crisis communications plan has all of the key ingredients:

- ✓ a crisis communications team
- ✓ an identified team spokesperson
- ✓ identified team member responsibilities
- ✓ a management roster
- ✓ a list of emergency and community contacts
- ✓ media policy and procedures
- ✓ defined company key messages
- ✓ testing and evaluation procedures



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