

A QUICK GUIDE TO SURVIVING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS



Joan Garry

"2/3 of all crises should never make it to the level of "crisis." From the top of the management chain to the bottom of the organization food chain, everyone should always be on the lookout for those little problems or issues that, ignored or underestimated, can grow into a full blown public nightmare."

Larry Smith, President of the Institute for Crisis Management

"Because of what Larry just said, you should make sure your staff feels empowered enough to share bad news and even potential bad news with you."

Joan Garry

PLAN

I know. You don't do enough of this on any front – there just isn't time. But this is easier (and harder) than a 3 year strategic plan. This is a 3 hour meeting. Maybe even 2. Senior staff. A flip chart. Maybe cocktails (that was a joke).

Three important things to say that might ignite you to take the time to do this.

- *Ask anyone who has been in the eye of the storm how much time they spent.*
- *Ask anyone who has been in the eye of the storm how demoralizing it was.*
- *Ask anyone who has been in the eye of the storm how little time the storm left her/him to do the other 99% of their job.*

You pose and answer the following questions:

- Make a list of your organization's biggest vulnerabilities. Look hard, look back, and look deep. Could be about staff. Could be about certain policies. Could be about challenges varying stakeholders (internal or external) has had / currently has with your organization
- Could any one of those constitute a real 5 alarm blaze crisis in my organization – this could also be phrased as "what do you have nightmares about?"
- As part of that question, make a list of the organizations and more specifically the individuals who might like to see you fail. The sad reality is that most crises are either self made or ignited by someone in our own tribe. And they always involve reporters.
- What are the assumptions the press, the public, your stakeholders might have in this situation?
- Agree on a crisis team and a lead spokesperson.
- Develop basic crisis operating principles. Personally I like seeing "never lie" at the top of the list.
- Prioritize stakeholder groups. Write it down and put it in the crisis file. Probably don't want your board to read it in the newspaper before getting your call.

CRISIS MODE

- Respond quickly. Do not procrastinate. Objectors and the press fill the open space. To angry constituents, an hour feels like four.

- At the same time, be sure you have solid, well thought out messages. You need to get it right. If that means you answer a reporter's call and say "I am going to need to get back to you at <time certain>." Make sure you can deliver on that time certain.
- At your organizations, the assumption is that the executive director will be the spokesperson (unless it is a crisis of smaller magnitude and using the ED as spokesperson actually elevates the level of crisis).
- Keep all staff informed. Staff members who feel out of the loop can be skeptical that the organization is doing the right things. You need to build and maintain the full confidence of all staff.
- Assign someone to monitor the media. How often? How widespread? You want to be mighty sure that a crisis that hits the LGBT press does not spread to mainstream press. That should be one of your biggest worries.
- Be available. If you are in a crisis, you don't want to be criticized for handling it poorly by being rightfully accused of being unresponsive.
- Find allies. External validators (not board members) can be very useful in helping people to either control the situation or contextualize it.
- Make it clear to staff and board that no one talks directly to the media without talking to you communications director or the lead on messaging.
- Avoid the bunker mentality. Of course it matters if the press is causing your organization trouble, but keep it in perspective. When you are dealing with the problem all day long, it always seems bigger and more out of control than it actually is.
- Remember: you have many constituents. You can not ignore them because your bandwidth is being eaten up 24/7 by your naysayers.
- If your crisis involves criticism regarding a policy and a call for change, follow your heart and not the mob. Keep your eye on the mission of your organization and do what is right for all of your stakeholders.
- If at all possible, use the crisis to actually AFFIRM the value of your organization.
- Make sure that you yourself are not prolonging the crisis by giving the critics too much power.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THE STORM IS PASSING

- Good question, Joan.
- Sometimes you decide, especially if it involves a policy decision. Make it, explain why you made it and move on.
- More often than not, it diffuses. And you have to take the temperature carefully so that you can make a judgment call to begin to disengage at the right moment.

IF YOU DO NOT HAVE A REAL, HONEST-TO-GOODNESS DEBRIEF

- Another crisis will come your way and I guarantee you that you will walk right into the same trap and make the same mistakes.
- You will not be available to mentor a colleague who may need support as he/she maneuvers thru a crisis.

