

Crisis Communications 101: An Instructional Tale

Once upon a time, in a place closer than you think, a Deputy Chief was instructed to handle a very contentious news conference. Even with a half-day's worth of preparation from the department's media officer, including a listing of possible questions, key messages prepared, and a couple of dry runs; when push came to shove, the D/C froze when faced with seven blazing camera lights, a dozen or so microphones and a sea of inquiring faces. Sometimes, no matter what you do to prepare for the media, it's not enough.

However, when it comes to a crisis, there's absolutely no time to make mistakes or hesitate. Important questions must be answered, and for many of these incidents, the media and public look to police for response and reassurance.

During the events of September 11th, law enforcement and other government agencies couldn't be entirely sure of exactly what was happening in North American skies. In Canada, with thousands of people being deposited at airports across the country, people were asking the same questions: "What's happening?", "Is it over?", "Are we a target?", and "What can I do?"

Essentially, people wanted to know, "Are we OK?"

As a law enforcement agency, it's extremely important to answer this question. In times of crisis, people need to hear from powers that be that, "Yes, we are OK", "Yes, law enforcement is in control", and "Yes, here's what you can do" - a 'call to action', so to speak.

As silly as it may sound, it's just as important for law enforcement to very clearly acknowledge the incident. Similar to what we learn in suicide intervention courses, you must ask the man standing on the high ledge if he's planning to commit suicide. You have to be blunt and acknowledge the situation to enable others to say the words and open dialogue.

After 9-11, it was vital government and law enforcement acknowledged the incident and said, "Yes, four planes have crashed. The World Trade Centre Towers have collapsed. A plane has exploded into the Pentagon, and there are likely thousands of people dead." Saying the words essentially made a surreal situation real for the public, and allowed them to begin to process somewhat unbelievable events.

During a crisis, it is also imperative your department express empathy for victims. It's good to remind the public that, yes, law enforcement is made up of human beings, who feel, cry, and are deeply touched by situations they deal with. Sometimes it's important to acknowledge that emergency services personnel are not "Supermen". As the Five for Fighting song adopted by the New York Fire Department after 9-11 says, "Even heroes have the right to bleed".

At the same time (and this may sound contradictory), it's just as important to convey the fact that "we are in control." For example, during an incident where a police officer is shot and killed, there is no question officers feel great pain, anger and emotional turmoil. . However, those feelings are tempered by their professional training, and the message is, "Yes, we are hurting, but our 'game faces are on' so we can get the job done. There's no question we will grieve, but right now, we have a job to do". That message in itself expresses empathy and conveys that all-important message of being in control.

Finally, people need to hear from their police and government officials that, "We will go on". Particularly when dealing with large-scale crises due to environment (hurricanes), human error (the Challenger) or terrorism, it is of utmost importance for the public to hear the words, "We will go on." Remember, law enforcement is inherently more trusted by the public than elected officials, so hearing those words from a

Police Chief goes a long way towards making a community feel safe.

When it comes to your department's action during crisis, it is important to be proactive in controlling, containing and managing the message. Let others speak for themselves; concentrate on the basics mentioned above. Stick to your key messages and do your best to keep "police sources" quiet (another issue altogether).

Finally, monitor the media. In times of crises, when reporters are under great pressure to perform and self-appointed 'experts' come out of the woodwork, it's sometimes necessary to gently remind the media to be responsible. In the heat of the moment, media sometimes aren't thorough in their due diligence when it comes to information sources. And in today's barrage of competitive, 'on-the-scene' media, incorrect information can be disseminated instantaneously, so watch what's going on-air, and call the media on inaccuracies. That's when good relationships established with your local media will be extremely valuable.

So, next time the proverbial you-know-what hits the fan ...step up to the plate. Acknowledge the incident, express empathy, convey control, reassure the public, manage the message and monitor the media. These six steps will go far in helping to ensure your department comes out the other side of a crisis looking professional and capable of handling anything.

About the Author

Judy Pal has more than 25 years experience in the field of communications and broadcast journalism. She has taught public relations at the university level and has worked as a reporter, producer and news anchor, as well as a PIO for a large law enforcement agency and municipal government. For more information on media relations and media training, please contact the writer at info@prforpolice.com.