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Handling a Crisis Situation Through Media Training

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ABSTRACT

When an abnormal situation occurs at your facility, management must be prepared, not only to handle the situation itself, but also to effectively communicate with stakeholders. The media is very important vehicle for this communication. However, media coverage can either be a fiasco for public relations or it can be an effective and successful tool to maintain stakeholder support..

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When an unexpected situation or issue threatens the ability of your company to complete its mission, the company's crisis management team must meet to determine the severity of the crisis, how to resolve the situation, and how to communicate the status and/or solution to the crisis to its stakeholders through the media. A major part of a company's ability to navigate through the critical situation is its ability to successfully communicate its message to its stakeholders, frequently through tough questions from the media.

While abnormal situations are unexpected by nature, management can be prepared to handle a potential public relations nightmare beforehand with effective media training.

Marasco Newton Group is a premier environmental and information management consulting firm that has supported public and private sector clients for more than 10 years. We specialize in designing and implementing crisis communication programs for our clients to handle difficult situations while achieving their mission objectives.

In this course, Marasco Newton Group will help management prepare to handle an abnormal situation by addressing the following questions:

- How do you craft a message that addresses a crisis situation while protecting your company's reputation?
- How do you control potentially bad press coverage and provide a positive spin?
- What are the rules when dealing with the press during a crisis?
- What are the "dos" and "don'ts" when being interviewed by the press?
- Do you recognize that your company's behavior during a crisis situation is the platform for the company's future?

Handling a Crisis Situation Through Media Training

By Delilah Barton and Pete Macias, Marasco Newton Group

Overview

When an abnormal situation occurs at your facility, management must be prepared, not only to handle the situation itself, but also to effectively communicate with stakeholders. The media is a very important vehicle for this communication. However, media coverage can either be a fiasco for public relations or it can be an effective and successful tool to maintain stakeholder support.

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Be Prepared Before a Crisis Situation

Although an incident at your facility is unexpected by nature, it is important to be prepared for any potential situation. Just as you train your employees in emergency response to prepare them to handle an incident, management also must be prepared to talk to the media about the same incident.

1. Conduct a self-assessment to determine your company's credibility and your reputation with the local media.

The first step a facility should take is to evaluate its level of credibility with the local media. Ask yourself a few questions:

- How well have we communicated with the press in the past? Has the communication been limited to an occasional press release?
 - Do we have a company spokesperson who regularly talks to the press (has a working relationship with the local media)?
- Under what circumstances have we communicated with the press? Has it only been during a crisis situation?

Second, this self-assessment should include some research. The news media routinely uses databases to gather information on you. Look at the same databases to see what information the press sees, for example:

- Lexis-Nexis (fee service);
- OSHA databases (www.osha.gov);
- EPA's databases (www.epa.gov); and
- Environmental Databases (do a Web search on your company).

Review the archived newspaper articles about your facility. By reading past coverage on your facility, you can determine your company's reputation with the press and the local community. You may be surprised to find that your facility is characterized as a polluter or an unsafe place to work despite your actual compliance record.

2. Appoint a company spokesperson to talk to the media and to develop a positive working relationship.

With the self-assessment complete, you will see your strengths and your weaknesses. It is time to maintain your strengths and improve upon your weaknesses. If you do not already have one, appoint a company spokesperson. This person should be in the position of plant manager or higher. The spokesperson will not only be responsible for handling the media questions in a crisis, but should also establish open

communications with the media when things are going great. You do not want your first introduction to the local press to be an incident. If you have had incidents before, you still do not want your next communication with the press to be an incident.

Using the information gathered in step 1, identify which media should be notified of company information, for example:

- Local newspaper;
- Radio reporters;
- Television reporters;
- Reporters who cover specific beats, i.e., chemical industry, environmental, or safety (these may be trade journals);
- Local newsletters, i.e., homeowners association.

3. Make your first “new” impression one of safety and environmental consciousness.

The spokesperson should begin positive outreach to the identified media. Introduce them to the facility that is safe and protecting the environment. This can be achieved many ways:

- Give the media a tour of the facility;
- Bring the media in during safety training or for the emergency response training; or
- Sponsor a facility education workshop.

The spokesperson can continue building a positive relationship with the media by preparing and issuing press releases on company news, such as:

- Personnel announcements;
- Community outreach activities;
- Implementation of new safety programs, and
- General business news.

By building this type of working relationship with the local media, the media now knows the company face—the face of your spokesperson and the faces of your employees. This personal connection will go a long way and will help make crisis communications less painful if it is needed.

4. Be prepared for the media during a crisis with a crisis communication plan.

Your facility has an emergency response plan to handle an unexpected incident. You also should have a crisis communication plan. In this plan, you should identify the person who will work with the media. Ideally, this person is already identified as your company spokesperson. This person should have access to all information during a crisis. You can anticipate

the types of questions that the media will ask during a crisis and prepare the list beforehand. For example, a facility that just experienced an incident can expect the following questions:

- What happened? Was it an explosion, a fire, a leak, a construction incident?
- Has it been contained?
- Were there any injuries/fatalities/hospitalizations? How many?
- Is the danger over?
- Is there any environmental damage?
- How will the local community be affected? Is there going to be an evacuation? Sheltering-in-place?
- What emergency response was required?

Anticipating these questions, the spokesperson can gather this information before meeting with the media.

Before an incident ever occurs, a company can create factsheets about the chemicals at the facility. The factsheets can contain safety information about the chemical, how much of the chemical is onsite, a description of the process that contains the chemical, and the emergency response procedures in-place to handle the accidental release of the chemical. Then if an incident involves a specific chemical, the facility can issue these factsheets to the press to provide the background information they will request.

Establish in your crisis communication plan, when and where you will meet with the press in the aftermath of an incident. Even if no information is available, it is advisable to hold a press conference within an hour of an incident to inform the media that you will update them as soon as you have information.

Having a crisis communication plan in hand will prepare you to handle the very difficult task to talking to the press when your company is already in a difficult situation of handling the incident itself.

Handling the Media During a Crisis Situation

The unthinkable happens and there is an incident at your facility. You may have a fire, an explosion or a leak. There may be injuries, even fatalities. Your emergency response crew is on the job to bring the incident under control. You have your hands full, but your phone starts ringing—it's the local media. The television crews already are lining up outside your gate and they are filming the incident.

How well your emergency response crew handles the incident will determine how long it will take for the situation to be under control or how many more may be injured. And how well you handle the media will determine whether your company's reputation will be protected or damaged after the incident. While an incident has occurred, you still have the opportunity to maintain the "face" you have already established with the media and local community.

How can you control potentially bad press coverage and provide a positive spin? The incident has occurred and you may be facing the ugly reality that there have been fatalities. How can there be a positive spin on that?

Golden Rules:

- 1. Be honest, and**
- 2. Do not answer hypothetical questions.**

There are two golden rules when answering questions from the media. First, be honest—acknowledge that an unfortunate incident has occurred. Answer the questions that you have information on. In the hours after an incident, you should be able to gather information according to your crisis communication plan and be prepared to present the information to the media in a press conference. Specifically, you should be

prepare to provide the following information:

- Time of the incident;
- Type of incident, i.e. a fire, explosion, leak, etc.
- Process where the incident occurred;
- The chemicals involved in the incident;
- How long it took your emergency response crew to respond;
- How long it took to contain the incident;
- Were all employees accounted for;
- Any injuries and/or fatalities involved;
- Were employees taken to a hospital for treatment and have they been released;
- Were any employees admitted to the hospital for observation/surgery;
- Off-site consequences, i.e., evacuation, sheltering-in-place, etc.; and
- What other process have been shut down for precautionary measures.

Once this information is presented, you can elect to take questions. Only answer the questions that you know the answer to. If you do not know an answer to a question, it is much better to state that you will find out the answer and get back to them than to say “No Comment.” In general, the “No Comment” response is negative. It implies that you are untruthful. Avoid using it. If legal counsel advises that you do not comment, choose other words to convey this, such as “At this time we are not prepared to answer questions about this incident.” You have the option to establish the ground rules in a press conference. You may state that you will present the information you have at that time and there will be no questions after because you have given the media all you know.

Along the same lines of being honest, when you do answer questions, do not speculate or guess the answer to a question. Only state what you know to be fact. For example, a reporter is bound to ask, “What caused the incident?” Do not respond with, “We are not sure, but we think it was a faulty valve.” The reporter will print that the cause of the incident was a faulty valve. For most chemical incidents, the root cause will not be known until an internal investigation is complete. State, “We do not know the cause of the incident at this time. But we will launch a full investigation to find the cause.”

In addition, when you answer questions about the incident, do not miss the opportunity to highlight the good job your people are doing in the emergency response. For example, “We have had two injuries. But because of the swift response of our emergency response team both men are being treated for their injuries and appear to be stable.” You acknowledge that something went wrong, but you also are pointing out that the facility is doing something right in response. And this good action is saving lives and preventing more injuries.

The second golden rule is “Do not answer a hypothetical question.” Answering a hypothetical question will only lead to bad results. For example, “If this chemical was released into the community, would my kids be in danger?” This is a hypothetical situation; it has not occurred. You do not answer this question. Instead to redirect the focus by stating the facts, such as “The incident has been contained by our emergency response team. There have been no releases to the local community.”

By following these two rules and emphasizing your company’s emergency response to the incident, you can diffuse a potentially disastrous public relations situation. You still have to face the inevitable consequence of the incident itself, but by being honest and not being trapped with hypothetical questions you can maintain your credibility with the local media and the community.

Post-crisis Communications

Declare an end to the crisis. It is important that your organization is the source for the declaration of the end of the crisis. This maintains your credibility with the stakeholders and local community.

Internally, management should hold a debriefing to review the effectiveness of your communication during the crisis. Analyze the outcome of the media’s coverage, including the

positive and negative results. Then you should revise your communication plan to reflect what you have learned during this crisis.

The next step is to follow-up with the local community and those who were affected by the incident. This includes keeping the news media informed about the resolution of the situation.

In the aftermath of an incident, it also is important to perform public outreach. This may include holding public meetings to educate the public about the root-causes of the incident and to highlight the actions being taken to prevent future incidents.

Conclusion

When dealing with intangibles such as the media, you cannot be completely prepared for what they are going to ask you. But you should be as prepared as possible. You must have your crisis communication plan in-place and your entire crisis management team should be briefed to handle any situation.

Additionally, begin your rapport with the local media now.