

Your Building Just Blew Up – Now What? (Crisis? What Crisis?)

The news just reached the CEO of your firm AcmeTech and she is looking for immediate answers hoping the investments made in your program were worth it. You are standing in the parking lot next to the burning mass amidst the hordes of new media. You begin by providing her the following information, calmly and clearly:

As an extension of our crisis management plan, we created a public relations and media plan (PRMP) describing policies and procedures for the coordination of communications between AcmeTech and any applicable outside media outlets and the public should an emergency or reputation impacting event occur.

This PRMP not only addresses media relations and communications issues, but draws upon existing procedures for the rapid damage assessment of potentially harmful situations and the methods for responding to these situations quickly, effectively and without controversy.

As you know, the main goal of the PRMP is to establish flexible guidelines for responding to most any crisis, while ensuring designated spokespersons like me and other key personnel are fully educated and trained on their roles in the event of a crisis.

The PRMP describes methods for maintaining proper lines of communication to appropriate personnel, organizations and media outlets ensuring factual messages are delivered and rumors are minimized if not completely eliminated. Our intent is to demonstrate that we are fully cooperating with the proper authorities while sincerely exhibiting the proper level of control and consistency. We borrowed heavily from our training sessions with Judith Hoffman using her 10 C's of Good Crisis Communication (Hoffman, 2008) as core components of our PRMP.

The PRMP is designed to be used in conjunction with the normal decision-making hierarchy of the organization and does not supplant that decision-

1. Cooperation
2. Control
3. Caring and Concern
4. Competence
5. Credibility
6. Consistency
7. Clarity
8. Conciseness
9. Currency
10. Calm

making process. I've provided you a written outline of the PRMP as a refresher.

The Crisis Management Team (CMT) met by conference call since our normal meeting place is inaccessible. They are maintaining logs of all activities and actions including audio and video statements. A statement following our standard format of who, what, where, when, why and how is ready for release and I will follow this when we get in front of the cameras. The statement is based upon fact and ensures we stay away from any speculation. I will indicate to the media that we will issue a statement, provide them a written statement of the same, and keep them abreast of any new information as it is made available to us. We will provide all interested parties a full report of the incident once it has been fully investigated and documented as part of our post-crisis evaluation process.

- Purpose of the Plan
- Plan Objectives
- Scope
- Policy
- Readiness Preparation
 - 1.Development and Release of Information
 - 1.Notification
 - 2.Cautions Concerning Information on Customers
 - 3.Key Message Creation
 - 4.What must be said / What must be heard
 - 5.What are the facts
 - 6.Approval Process
 - 7.News Media Access
 - 8.Photography
 - 9.Video Taping
 - 10.Web Postings
 - 11.Blogs
 - 12.Email
 - 13.Website
 - 14.Twitter/Tweet
 - 15.RSS Feeds
 - 16.Other
 - 2.Crisis Communications Team
 - 1.Media Information
 - 2.Public Information
 - 3.Key external stakeholders will be notified
 - 4.Internal Communications
- Response
 - 1.A spokesperson and back up will be designated
 - 1.Training
 - 2.A draft fact sheet will be prepared
 - 3.A streamlined approval process will be used
- Follow Up
 - 1.Post-Crisis Debriefing and Evaluation
 - 2.Evaluation Analysis and Plan Updates
 - 1.What worked?
 - 2.What did not?
 - 3.Were we misquoted?
 - 1.Next steps / options
 - 4.Develop new relationships where?
 - 5.Issues for Action
 - 6.Report submission
 - 3.Communication of Updates/Changes
 - 4.Retaining on Updates/Changes
- Appendix A: Contact Log
- Appendix B: Emergency Operations Centre
- Appendix C: Sample Scripts
- Appendix D: News Conference Guidelines
- Appendix E: Media Relations Reminders
 - 1.In General
 - 2.Handling Media Interviews
 - 1.How to prepare for Broadcast Interviews
 - 2.Do's and Don'ts During the Interview process
 - 3.How To Handle Yourself During A TV Interview
 - 4.Handling Tough Questions
 - 5.What are the tough questions
 - 6.Negatives
 - 7.Question clarification
 - 8.Tips On Appearance
 - 9.Tips on Body Language
 - 10.How To Respond During A Newspaper Interview
 - 11.After The Interview
- Education, Training and Exercise
 - 1.Exercise Log
 - 1.New Employee Orientation Guideline for Crisis Communications
 - 2.Examples of Industry Communications Failures
 - 3.Crisis Exercises
 - 4.Role playing
 - 5.Reverse role playing
 - 6.Exercise Area Diagrams
 - 7.Tabletop Exercise Templates (Word/Excel/PowerPoint)
 - 8.Exercise Critique / After Action Report
 - 9.Recommendation for Training and Certification Program
 - 10.Drills – Multiple Scenarios
- Equipment, Supplies, Communications Support for Media Information Center
- Document Revision History

Security personnel created a separate area for the media as you can see from the area 50 yards to your left. This is where we will engage the media. Normally we would have them organize in Conference Room A1 in the main building. We have WBZ-TV, WCVB TV-5, and WFXT Fox 25 representatives setting up in this area as we speak. They have been filming the scene for the past 10 minutes. It is my understanding that CNN is working directly with WBZ-TV indicating this crisis is expanding to national and international levels.

Per standard operating procedures, we notified all corporate offices of the incident, placed an initial announcement on our Internet web page and sent an automated e-mail to our vendors and partners. The CMT is now contacting town officials to keep them abreast of the situation.

The CMT prepared a series of questions and answers for situations like this. We practiced several scenarios in our training sessions and asked some of our toughest business people, those who have been

naysayers of the overall crisis management program, to attend and assume

the role of reporters. It was not a fun exercise but it served to prepare us for real-world issues while improving our confidence. During these drills, we practiced proper body language, responding to negative and other tough questions, while honing our key messaging and pre-defined scripts for such a disaster. Ms. Hoffman provided oversight to these drills.

Since we have been very active in the community with the soup kitchens, contributions to local schools, our support of local and national charities and our financial and product support to Barrington City Hall all serve as gestures of good will that has built political capital for AcmeTech. We held focus group meetings with local environmental organizations and the media to ensure all issues associated with building near the wetlands were addressed. This provided us with insights about local community issues and gave the community an opportunity to learn of our plans to expand the company and the tax base.

As you know, we are located in a business park and therefore do not represent a threat to our non-business neighbors. We previously established relationships with our business neighbor, PNC and the CMT is contacting our counterparts at PNC, providing them an update and inquiring on any potential injuries or impacts to their business operations.

My backup is in contact with the Chief of Police and the Fire Chief. She previously provided a listing to local authorities of any hazardous materials we have in the building. They understand there could be secondary explosions and are keeping media and non-essential personnel back for safety purposes.

We have initial facts about the disaster that the CMT entered into the online form. We have validated this data with local authorities including fire, policy and medical personnel. Our message to the media per your final approval is as follows:

According to initial reports from the Barrington Fire Department, an explosion and ensuing fire occurred at approximately 6:10 this morning at the AcmeTech Headquarters building located at 829 Pettin Road in Barrington. The fire is under control but it is estimated 50% of the building was destroyed in the initial explosion. It is my sad duty to inform you that one as yet unidentified employee is confirmed dead.

The cause of the explosion and fire are under investigation but according to Barrington Police, it is believed to have been set by a recently laid-off employee caught running from the scene moments after the blast. The name of the employee has not been released to the media at this time but

he has been identified as a white male in his early 30's. He is currently being detained for questioning.

Three ACMETECH employees were taken to Barrington Memorial Hospital in North Barrington and are being treated for third degree burns. Five other employees are unaccounted for at this time. We are using every available resource to continue searching the building and surrounding areas. I'm sure you understand that we are withholding the names of all affected employees until next of kin have been contacted. Our hearts and prayers go out to all employees and their families and the first responders who are in harm's way.

Emergency service personnel from four towns are onsite and Angel Flights are inbound as per protocol. AcmeTech's Crisis Management Team is working very closely with local authorities to assist in determining the cause of the explosion. American Red Cross personnel are onsite assisting us in the care and comfort of our colleagues.

We expect to have a more complete picture of the situation within the hour and will provide periodic updates to the media as required. I will now take your questions.

Hoffman, J. C. (2008). Keeping Cool on the Hot Seat. Clayton: Four C's Publishing Company.