



UNIVERSITY OF
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AEC 352

EXTENSION

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Crisis Communication in Environmental Education Programs¹

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Recalls of food products, contaminated by microbial pathogens. Over-the-counter medication laced with arsenic. Potentially dangerous chemicals accidentally released in the air. Each of these scenarios is a crisis situation for the company involved. And each crisis situation must be communicated to the general public through the news media.

Perhaps in no other area is communication so affected by crises than the environment. Situations such as chemical spills, over-harvesting of fish, or aerial application of chemicals for agricultural purposes have been targeted by environmental groups because of their potentially negative impact on the environment. As an environmental education 4-H agent, you may find yourself having to comment on controversial environmental topics. This fact sheet provides some pointers on how to work with the news media during a crisis situation.

Section 1: Crisis situation characteristics

All crises have common characteristics. First, they are nearly always negative. They cast shadows of doubt about the credibility of an organization in

the eyes of the public. Second, a crisis can create improper or distorted perceptions. A crisis may involve allegations that tell only part of the story and stimulate negative impressions by the public about the organization. Unfortunately, perception is too often reality. An organization, therefore, must be prepared to deal with erroneous comments.

Third, crisis situations are almost always disruptive to the organization. Work is placed on hold until the crisis is resolved. Last, a crisis generally takes the organization by surprise. The organization is placed in a "react" mode, where it reacts to the situation, rumors, comments, and potentially hostile interviews.

Section 2: Preparing for the crisis

As was previously mentioned, a crisis will take you by surprise, so what can you do to prepare for a crisis that you don't know about? You must develop a crisis plan prior to the onset of a crisis. The plan should address these key issues:

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- **Organize a “what if” brainstorming session with others in your office.** Come up with “what if” scenarios about potential crisis situations. Determine steps on how you would respond to the “what if” crises.
- **Gather and classify information into categories, such as *facts* and *rumors*.** Facts should be routinely updated; rumors should be verified or exposed as myths.
- **Select crisis management and crisis communication teams.** Who is responsible for communicating with the media during a crisis? Who fields telephone calls? Who makes decisions about what to say to the media? Everyone in your office should know who are on the crisis communication and crisis management teams.

Section 3: Communicating during the crisis

Following are some pointers on how to communicate to the news media during a crisis situation:

- **Get the facts.** Miscommunication heightens during a crisis and can be exaggerated by half-truths, distortions, or negative perceptions. Get to the heart of the real story and tell it.
- **Take the offensive when a serious matter occurs.** Be active, not reactive. Tell it all; tell it fast.
- **Deal with rumors swiftly.** Tell only the truth about what you know to be fact. Do not repeat others opinions, hearsay, or possibilities.
- **Centralize information.** Designate one spokesperson. A central spokesperson provides a singular "face" for the reporters. Viewers begin to become familiar with a central spokesperson, so this is one way to begin building credibility with the organization, if the person comes across as trustworthy. Centralized information also will minimize miscommunication.
- **Don't get mad. Don't get mad. Don't get mad.** Keep your cool in an interview or news conference with reporters. Some of their questions may be hostile, and some questions and comments may seem to be a personal attack to you, but remember that they are trying to get information on a crisis-oriented story that may have widespread impact to their audiences. So don't get mad when you are asked the “hard” questions.
- **Stay “on the record” in all interviews.** Do not go “*off the record*.” Any comment worth saying should be said “on the record.” If you go “off the record,” be ready to read it in print the next day. Is this unethical for reporters to report “off the record” comments? Sure, but anything can, may, and will be done to advance a story. You should not be lured into going “off the record” under any circumstance.
- **No “no comments.”** Try to have an answer for reporters questions. But if you don't have an answer, don't be afraid to say, “I don't know, but I'll find out.” Saying “no comment” instead, appears to television news viewers and newspaper readers that you have something to hide.
- **In any crisis situation, follow every order, direction or suggestion from emergency officials.**
- **Write everything down.** Maintain a crisis communication inventory of what was said by whom and at what time. This way, you will have a record of the event and how it was communicated. You can evaluate your responses so you will be better prepared if another crisis happens in the future.

Section 4: After the crisis...

After the crisis is over and all communication with the news media has ended, don't just sit back and do nothing; you won't be ready for the next crisis! It is time to evaluate how you handled the crisis. Your review should include the following:

- **A review of why the crisis occurred.** Could you have done anything to prevent the crisis?

- **An evaluation of how the crisis was handled.**

You may want to use the crisis communication inventory you maintained to evaluate how communication was handled. Was information disseminated through one spokesperson? Did miscommunication occur?

- **An examination of similar scenarios.** What would you do in a similar situation in the future? What did others do in similar situations?

A crisis will happen in the life of most organizations. Taking time now to prepare for a crisis – even if you think it will never occur – and how to communicate to the news media during a crisis is your best defense.

Note

All materials and fact sheets related to this *Extension Enhancement Award* program are provided on this Web site: <http://envmedia.ifas.ufl.edu>