

# Advisor

THE Newsletter of Effective Communication

## Special Report:

# COMMUNICATING IN TIMES OF CRISIS

There is little doubt that September 11, 2001, will be remembered by all Americans as an historic date – much like July 4th, November 22nd and December 7th. Indeed, the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States will be nation-changing, if not world-changing. Many of the changes remain to be seen. But even the immediate consequences of the worst terrorist act in history are nothing short of historic:

- Seven buildings in New York's World Trade Center Complex (including the two, 110-story Twin Towers) collapsed or partly collapsed.
- A portion of the Pentagon was destroyed.
- Approximately 4,000 people died, including 266 passengers and crew on the four commercial airplanes hijacked by the terrorists.
- Trading on all U.S. financial markets stopped for four days – the longest shutdown in 68 years.
- For the first time ever, the government grounded all commercial flights, some 40,000 in all.
- In major cities across the country, skyscrapers and government buildings were evacuated and millions of workers were sent home.

There is also little doubt that the catastrophic events of September 11 and their fallout have taken crisis management and communications into a new era. Employers are struggling to keep employees reassured and focused amid worker uncertainty about their safety, their priorities and their jobs. These and other new dynamics pose serious challenges for business professionals who must ensure the continued viability of their businesses, while being ever more responsive to the information needs of people both inside and outside their organization.

Undoubtedly, 9.11.01 will become one of the most widely examined case studies in the history of modern crisis management – joining the ranks of events such as the Tylenol poisonings and the Exxon Valdez oil spill. It will be a valuable tool for those concerned with preventing or managing human-caused crises. But even at this early point, important lessons in crisis management and communications have emerged. This – our Fall issue of *Advisor* – is a special report on several of those lessons.

Please check our Web site for periodic supplemental information updates about communicating in times of crisis. [www.ammermanexperience.com](http://www.ammermanexperience.com)

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need to be free from worry about money and job security.

*Belongingness needs* are related to social processes, and include the need for love and affection and the need to be accepted by one's peers.

*Esteem needs* comprise the need for a positive self-image and self-respect, and the need for recognition and respect from others.

At the top of the hierarchy are what Maslow calls the *self-actualization needs*. They involve realizing one's potential for continued growth.

Q. The airline industry generally gets high marks for its sensitivity in dealing with people following a crisis. Is that reputation deserved?

A. Yes, but it wasn't always. When I started my work in the late 80s, most airline crisis plans were incomplete. The plan for one major airline, for example, said, "If there's an accident, call clergy." Also, I've heard airline presidents say, "Look, it's not our fault; we didn't mean for it to happen." Or I've seen them come before families within 24 hours of a crash and make statements like, "We want to assure our stockholders that financially we're going to be fine." What a horrible and offensive thing to say! Because it's not a business-as-usual climate.

Fortunately, most of that has changed over the last few years.

Q. So what are the airlines doing right?

A. They've learned from what families have taught us – and that is, first, look to see what it is families want, and then provide the things that allow them to feel normal: access to family, friends and people they work with.

Airlines are not always at fault when there's a crash. (Delta didn't cause the wind shear that brought down its plane in Dallas in 1985.) But the public sees the airline as responsible for the people who trusted them and

bought tickets. Most airline officials understand that today. That's why they're more likely to come right out and say, "We're terribly sorry and we're going to take care of you in every way we know will be helpful."

Data show that when people have a positive perception of the airline, they do better in terms of traumatic stress symptoms, major depression, all the disorders associated with trauma. Also, they are more willing to settle sooner and get on with their lives.

Q. What can other organizations learn from the airlines, particularly as they relate to dealing with employees?

A. We've learned a lot beyond how to handle the public in a crisis. We've learned that when companies rally around their employees and acknowledge that there's been a horrible loss, tremendous bonding occurs within the organization.

Those of us who study the brain know that in a crisis, people operate much more in a "feeling" state than in a cognitive or "thinking" state. So if your CEO or your boss wants to continue with business as usual, two things happen: One, he or she misses a great opportunity to create a sense of connection with people. And two, and more importantly, he misses a great opportunity to demonstrate his humanity.

**When people are in crisis, we need to bolster their natural support systems.**

Like some other industries, airlines are technologically advanced. So most of the time, their people think in terms of technology – airplanes, computers, reservations, etc. But

when an accident happens, that's the time a company must come forward and show its humanity. In a crisis, employees are turned off by a "heady" response. It's very hard to connect with a "talking head" when your heart's broken. But once people again feel connected, they can move back into their cognitive state.

Q. And you're saying that an organization plays a critical role in moving people through the recovery process?

A. Absolutely. Empower people to help each other. Look to see what it is the person needs at that time, instead of assuming they need help from the outside. Because often it's from the inside.

In the Columbine tragedy, people came from all over into that community, and there were people right there within the community who knew some of what to do. But sometimes the resources within are pushed out. I've seen airline disasters where people would be spread apart. Someone would come in and get between children and their families, and that's wrong! We need to support and bolster that unit – whether it's the family unit, the workplace unit, the school. Those of us from the outside who want to help need to guard against thinking, "Because I have a Ph.D., I know more than they do." I may not. I may not know more about how to help that stranded survivor than the reservation agent who's on the phone with him.

As a professional, I'm always looking to see how I can bolster that natural support system, because long term, that's whose going to be there when I'm gone.







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- If your crisis involves the loss of life, describe it as a "tragedy," not as an "unfortunate incident."

- Avoid talking about the economic consequences of the crisis in tandem with comments about injuries or deaths. Or at least don't lead with a discussion of damage costs, impact on sales or profits, or adequate inventory levels; treat such items as a footnote to your primary statement.

- Expressing empathy, caring or concern does not imply accepting liability. There is a difference between accepting responsibility and accepting blame.

- Put a human face on your organization. Issuing a press release is preferable to saying nothing, but having a real person talking on camera is the best way to make your communication personal. Also, avoid words such as "the corporation," or "the company." Instead, use your company's name in conjunction with "our company" or "we."

- When reading from a prepared statement, look up at the reporter or the camera at the point when you express concern. Speak those words from your heart rather than read them verbatim.

- Although expressing concern or showing emotion is acceptable, losing composure (e.g., crying) is not. In a crisis, your role often requires you to communicate strength. Spokespeople who cry don't inspire confidence. (In President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress shortly after the terrorist attacks, his eyes teared briefly, but he never cried.) If, during a tragic event, you have responsibility for speaking to the media, assess your ability to keep your composure. If necessary, take a few moments before you speak, or consider having someone else do it (make sure they've had media training). 

## Back to the Drawing Board: Most Likely, Your Crisis Management Plan Is in Need of Review, if Not Revision

**E**xperts will tell you that the key to successful crisis management is planning. Without a plan – a good one – an organization involved in a crisis is less likely to recover quickly, and may not recover at all. The events of September 11 have underscored – more than anything in recent memory, including Y2K – the need for **all** organizations to have an up-to-date, comprehensive crisis management plan.

Across the country, many firms were well prepared – with crisis management plans and teams in place to respond to a variety of issues. But this was a new kind of crisis. Though not the target of the attacks, companies were impacted by them. Managers found themselves having to deal with an emotionally drained workforce as well as the challenges caused by closed financial markets, suspended travel and heightened security. It quickly became apparent that many of the existing models of crisis management and communication needed to be reexamined.

Today, what constitutes good crisis preparation differs from yesterday's model. (What firm could have envisioned losing a third of its entire workforce?) In light of 9-11-01, every forward-thinking organization should pull its crisis management plan off the shelf, dust it off, review it cover to cover, and if need be, revise it.

Among the questions to ask:

**1. How prepared is your crisis management team?** In a crisis, trained people with assigned responsibilities will carry the day. Because of promotions and other factors, members of most crisis management teams come and go. Is your team fully staffed? (Is every position on the team filled?) Do you have adequate backup through alternates, in case someone is unavailable or the crisis lasts for a sustained period, as was the case in September? When was the last time your team met, trained, rehearsed? Does someone always know where they are and how they can be reached (i.e., business/home phone, business/home E-mail, mobile phone, pager)? Think of your crisis management team as you would any other piece of critical equipment that must

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work perfectly in an emergency.

**2. Are you prepared to meet the press?** Being unprepared to deal with the media results in a strong desire to remain silent. Does your management understand the role of the media in a crisis? More importantly, are they willing and trained to speak with reporters? When did they last have refresher media training? Would they know what to do if they were ambushed by an aggressive reporter? What if circumstances prevent you from conducting a press briefing at your location; do you have an alternate site (e.g., hotel conference room) in mind? Cooperating with the media is second in

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importance only to employee and community safety and effective emergency response.


**3. Can you quickly communicate with employees?** Among the most important people who must receive information during a crisis are your employees. How effectively does information pass from managers to supervisors to employees – and then back up this chain? Do you have a variety of tools in place that let you make timely contact with your employees? If the company newsletter and bulletin board are your primary or exclusive vehicles, you are operating in yesterday's world. E-mail, voicemail and Intranet capability should be in place. In today's world, it's also critical for employees to have a way to "check in" with you.

**4. Have you anticipated worst-case scenarios?** Although you cannot anticipate every potential problem, you can ferret out problems that could contribute to or exacerbate a crisis. Do

you have backup computer systems to protect against the loss of centralized data? Take a hard look at phone systems that may become seriously overloaded during an emergency. (If the emergency affects the community, expect to receive hundreds of calls an hour from surrounding residents.) You need lines dedicated to handling communication with authorities, families, neighbors and media. What would your company do if it lost its physical location? Do you have immediate access to an alternate site? Do you have an ongoing relationship with a commercial realtor? Have you prepared for the possibility of losing multiple members of executive management?

A crisis is always an opportunity for critics and opponents. But it is also an opportunity for companies – to show employees and the public that it is responsive and has its priorities straight. Without preparation, training and drills,

many companies found themselves ill-prepared to deal with the events of September 11. Those who were prepared were able to get beyond the debilitating factors of fear, anxiety and uncertainty, and focus their attention on preventing or minimizing disruptions in their business.

The Ammerman Experience approach to crisis management is to prepare crisis management teams to assess points of vulnerability, while managing the human factors of a crisis. It's a method that is not highly dependent on previous experiences with crisis events, but rather a straightforward thought process designed to prepare managers to assess each aspect of a crisis and respond accordingly. Emphasis is placed on anticipating "touch points," and responding in a way to prevent further damage, while maintaining open communication with internal and external constituencies. 

## Will Your Front-line Employees Be an Asset or a Liability in a Crisis?

**D**oes your organization have a crisis management plan? Is there a crisis management team in place, and does each member know his or her assigned responsibilities? Have you anticipated and analyzed potential problems facing your organization? Are top management and your company spokesperson prepared to deal with the media? Have you rehearsed your plan by holding regular drills?

If your answer to each of these questions is, "Yes," your organization probably is well prepared for a crisis. Or is it? If you've ignored or misjudged the critical role front-line employees can play in helping an organization steer clear of, or successfully navigate through, a crisis, you may be less prepared than you think.

Despite an organization's best efforts, accidents and incidents happen, and difficult issues arise. If they are handled well, the organization can demonstrate that it is responsible, caring and competent. If they are mishandled, the organization may be perceived as inept, callous or arrogant. During a crisis, the image of an organization – hero or villain – often depends on how well it communicates with employees and their families, the media, neighbors, and appropriate authorities and agencies. And often, the first communicators are front-line employees.

Unfortunately, few of them are receiving training commensurate with the increasingly important and complex role they are being asked to play in a

crisis or potential crisis. Even in forward-thinking organizations, most of the time, effort and other resources being invested to equip employees to manage crises successfully are directed toward specialists and select members of management. Front-line employees – who can be either an asset or a liability – are largely ignored.

### Management

One of the most important components of crisis management is an organization's ability to spot a potential crisis. Most crises send out early warning signals. If these signals are detected, reported and acted upon, the crisis may be prevented or its negative effects minimized. Front-line employees are frequently in a position to serve as

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signal detectors. But they must clearly understand the why and how of signal detection.

**Quick Audit:**

- Are your front-line employees empowered to identify and report problems – large and small – that might escalate into crises?
- What training have they had in recognizing potential crises?
- Do they feel comfortable in reporting information to their supervisors?
- After receiving information, do their supervisors follow up with them?

**The media**

In a crisis, frequently the media will seek information and comment from employees – not necessarily those who are authorized to speak. Security guards, receptionists, switchboard operators and secretaries are usually among the first to come in contact with reporters.

According to Jeff Braun, vice president and general manager at The Ammerman Experience, "When I was a reporter, security guards were a favorite target of mine. I'd turn on the charm and try to get them to trust me. I was usually able to get valuable information that way. And if they wouldn't talk, sometimes they'd get confrontational, and that played well on TV."

Security guards – some of whom have military or law enforcement backgrounds – may have been taught the "antithesis of good communication," says Leonard Steinhorn, professor of communications at American University in Washington, D.C. When they communicate, these individuals tend to be abrupt, and often come across as cold or unfeeling – not the image a caring organization wants to convey.

Most organizations have spokespersons who are well qualified and trained, and are readily available to deal with the media during normal business hours. But it's during nights, weekends and holidays when organizations are most vulnerable. For that reason, shift supervisors and other front-line employees should also be trained. They need to know how to properly greet the media and escort them to a designated briefing area. And although it is unlikely that you'll ask front-line employees to take on the role of primary spokesperson (i.e., conducting a news conference and fielding questions), they may need to deliver a brief statement until your primary spokesperson arrives.

**Quick Audit:**

- Are your front-line employees familiar with your media policy?
- Do they know what to do and say if a reporter arrives or calls?
- Do they know how to politely decline an interview?
- Are they familiar with the tactics reporters will use to obtain information?
- Do they know not to be confrontational with the media, and not to touch a reporter or his equipment?
- If called upon, can they confidently and competently deliver a brief statement to the media?

**The public**

In addition to having to deal with the media, in times of crisis, organizations often must interact with other members

of the public:

- Government authorities at all levels (agencies and elected/appointed officials), including local authorities, such as medical, fire and rescue, law enforcement
- Community – such as fenceline neighbors, residents, leaders, activists
- Customers and suppliers
- Employees and their families

Much of this interaction takes place by phone. For example, in cases of public concern about service or product safety issues, a company may be inundated with hundreds of calls an hour from people in search of information or a target on which to vent their frustration.

Then there's the phone call that's out of the ordinary – the threat, the extortion, the vindictive or the prank. A company's ability to assuage public fear or concern may depend on the skills of a variety of employees, including switchboard operators, receptionists, customer service personnel, secretaries and others who may rarely, if ever, deal with a concerned or angry public.

**Quick Audit:**

- Do your front-line employees know how to respond to threatening, hostile or other sensitive phone calls?
- Do they know the importance of treating every call seriously?
- Do they know how to listen actively?
- When necessary, do they know how to keep someone on the line and talking?
- Do they know how to obtain information, while being careful about what they say in return?
- Can they handle customer complaints diplomatically?

## Rudolph Giuliani: Consummate Crisis Communicator

**F**or students of effective communication, the September 11 tragedy has unearthed a number of savvy communicators worth studying. One is New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. His performance in the aftermath of his city's worst crisis has been nothing short of remarkable.

Every crisis has two inseparable aspects; one cannot be separated from the other without seriously jeopardizing the success of your crisis management. First, you must take immediate, corrective action to remedy the problem. Second, you must communicate with a variety of external and internal audiences. Giuliani did both.

Clearly, he understands the role effective communication plays in helping to manage a crisis. His skillful handling of various communication challenges and opportunities was a direct result of the following:

- **He was accessible.** In a crisis, some people run and hide from the news media. But less than an hour after the attack on the World Trade Center, Giuliani was at the scene talking to reporters. To people across the country, he became a familiar image on CNN and the networks – conducting walking media briefings as well as participating in more traditional press conferences. He used the media to convey important information to New Yorkers, including information about evacuating parts of Manhattan, donating blood, and volunteering. He also told them how to obtain information about their loved ones.

In a crisis, one communication rule of thumb is this: communicate as quickly as possible and as frequently as is appropriate. Once again, Giuliani did both.

- **He was candid.** In a phone interview with FOX News, minutes after the disaster, he was forthright: "We don't know the number of casualties. We know it's going to be a large, large number of people who were injured and who died. At this point there's no way of knowing or even focusing on that . . ."

A week later, Giuliani acknowledged that only dead bodies would be recovered. "The chances of recovering any live human beings are very, very small," he said.


- **He was visible.** Like Winston Churchill during the London Blitz, Giuliani understood the importance of being seen – among ordinary people. (*The Washington Post* called him "Winston Churchill in a Yankees cap.") He toured the wreckage, playing host to President Bush and more than 100 members of Congress. He showed up at stock exchanges, firehouses, hospitals and churches. On October 1, he became the first U.S. mayor since 1952 to address the General Assembly of the United Nations. He was present at President Bush's address to the joint session of Congress. He even appeared on the season premiere of *Saturday Night Live*.

- **He was compassionate.** He hugged grieving family members. He sympathized with bond traders who lost co-workers, and clasped hands with dusty rescue workers at "ground zero." He made an unannounced stop at Engine 54, a midtown firehouse that lost 15 firefighters. There he signed a message book, writing, "To my heroes: The men who protect us and keep us safe. God bless you. With love and admiration, Rudy Giuliani."

- **He showed leadership.** He was calm, and instructed people to walk calmly out of southern Manhattan. Later, he urged New Yorkers to return to work, and tourists to visit the city and to spend money – to go to a play or a restaurant – to show that "terrorism can't stop us." Energetic, decisive, fearless and tough, he inspired confidence among New Yorkers and indeed all Americans.

- **He spoke plainly.** He was both articulate and easy to understand. His conversational style of communicating – devoid of jargon and pretense – is one all people can relate to.

After September 11, we frequently saw Rudy Giuliani wearing an "NYPD" or "FDNY" cap. But an equally important hat he wore was that of chief communicator.


In a crisis, think of emergency response activities and communications as two hats. Be sure to wear them both. 

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It is the safest of assumptions that a crisis can happen to any organization – large or small, public or private. One component of successful crisis management is timely, effective

There have been many instances where an organization did an excellent job of responding to a crisis, but failed to communicate or communicate effectively at the outset.

communication. There have been many instances where an organization did an excellent job of responding to a problem or crisis, but failed to communicate or communicate effectively at the outset. You can avoid joining those ranks by taking some precautionary steps to work with employees on the front line.

The Ammerman Experience offers several training sessions designed to prepare front-line employees to assist in a crisis. (See list on page 12) 

# We're Here to Help

**T**he Ammerman Experience has veteran status in preparing people to manage a crisis, and to communicate effectively during crisis situations. Our firm is known for its ability to customize its existing workshops and to create new sessions to meet the specific needs of clients. We can prepare executives to communicate financial information, show first-line supervisors how to communicate effectively with employees under their supervision, and much more. We ask people to change the way they think about communicating, and show them how to eliminate comfortable, but outdated and self-defeating, communication patterns. Here are some of the sessions we offer:

## Effective Media Communications

A one-day workshop that develops the skills needed for a successful encounter with the news media. Participants face tough, experienced journalists during multiple, videotaped, interview simulations, followed by extensive critiques. Crisis interviews are an important part of this highly interactive session. Skills learned in this session can also prove invaluable in a variety of other communication situations, including speaking to employees, customers, analysts and the public.

## Crisis Communications Team Training

A one-day, highly customized session designed to test how well members of your crisis communications management team work together and make decisions, and how proficient they are in communicating to a variety of external and internal audiences during a crisis. Problem solving is a key ingredient of this training. Using an evolving

crisis scenario developed with the client's help, team members learn how their decisions during a crisis can impact the sequence of events to follow.

## Emergency Response Drills

Organizations that rehearse their crisis plans and train their crisis management teams are far more successful when the crisis is real. As in any rehearsal, the value directly parallels the degree of realism. Using experienced, aggressive reporters, we test your organization's ability to handle the media during an emergency. The scenarios we use are also designed to assess your organization's ability to communicate effectively with all impacted populations.

## Effective Telephone Communications

A half-day workshop that addresses the specialized training needs of employees who regularly, or on a back-up basis, handle incoming telephone calls in crisis or other emergency situations. The session sensitizes employees to the stress of the phone call that is out of the ordinary – the threat, the extortion, the vindictive or the prank. Participants – typically, switchboard operators, receptionists, customer service personnel, secretaries and security guards – learn the importance of remaining calm and gathering accurate information that can aid management in preventing or resolving a crisis.

## First Response Media Training

A half-day workshop that provides guidance to those who may come in contact with the media, but are not primary spokespersons. This training also prepares supervisory personnel to detect potential crises before they happen.

Individuals who undergo this training will also be prepared to serve in a variety of functions to support a crisis communications effort. Typical session participants include: security guards, secretaries or other administrative personnel, receptionists, switchboard operators, first-line or shift supervisors, or other personnel who may have to interact briefly with the news media. Focus of the training is on politely declining an interview request, or providing limited, authorized information.

## Dealing with Public Anger: New Approaches to an Old Problem

Public anger is more common and more challenging than it used to be. It is also more manageable. Much has been learned about what causes public anger, and what works and what doesn't when trying to defuse it. This customized session offers practical guidance for reducing anger when dealing with an angry public.

## Crisis/Media Communications Training for Educators

A one-day workshop that addresses the increasingly important crisis and media training needs of those in the education field. The session provides superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals, public information officers, school board members and others with the confidence and competence needed to properly handle the communications aspect of a crisis.

For more information, contact us at 1-800-866-2026, or visit our Web site: [www.ammermanexperience.com](http://www.ammermanexperience.com).



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