



# CRISIS AT CITY HALL: PLANNING AHEAD CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

by Scott Summerfield and Sheri Benninghoven

Your week started normally. Then a reporter called asking about a variety of compensation, benefit and pension issues. Your gut told you these questions are probably only the beginning of a potentially devastating investigative story. How do you respond? Do you have a crisis communications plan in place to help you weather this storm? Developing a comprehensive strategy can help you anticipate tough media scrutiny and prepare your city for the difficult days ahead.

Your city is likely well-equipped to handle crises such as earthquakes, wildfires or floods. But many city leaders assume that these are the only situations that require advance preparation and training. In fact, it's more likely that man-made crises will grab media attention and threaten your city's credibility.

We've all seen such stories. Whether it's pension spiking, sexual harassment, computer data theft or embezzlement, the results are frighteningly similar: The city hasn't planned for a "non-traditional" crisis and its less-than-stellar response prolongs the

misery. Crises that hit city hall take a variety of shapes, but all have the potential to completely disrupt normal operations, make public officials defensive, shake employees' confidence and erode community good will that has taken years to earn.

One Northern California fire chief suddenly found his department's pensions under scrutiny by an aggressive investigative journalist who requested numerous collective bargaining, human resources and finance documents. The chief and many of his senior staff, who were in the midst of finalizing a new budget, put all other efforts on hold

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for several days to work with the reporter in-person and on the phone, explain the documents and answer numerous tough questions. When the dust finally settled, the chief summarized the stressful experience by saying, “I became a crisis communicator this week.”

Why does a strategic response matter? Imagine what your taxpayers will think the next time you ask them to support a bond measure or fee increase if they believe you’ve wasted their money and haven’t been straightforward with them when it counted most.

As you face a crisis, it’s helpful for your city to keep in mind three important communications principles:

1. Tell the truth;
2. Taxpayers have a right to know; and
3. Residents must have confidence in the city.

Though the principles may seem obvious, consider all the times you’ve seen public officials ignore them — and the negative news coverage that resulted. That alone should compel you to build these concepts into your city’s organizational culture.

## LEARNING FROM OTHERS’ MISTAKES

Analysis of agencies that have suffered excessively from crises shows several consistent communications missteps that can easily be avoided by planning ahead. The first step is to identify a team of savvy city leaders who can use the concepts presented here, along with the comprehensive supporting materials available online, and start the planning process now before a crisis actually strikes. Assuming the worst isn’t easy, but you’ll soon develop a good sense of the types of crises you may face; then you can begin crafting policies to deal with whatever comes your city’s way. Understanding the pitfalls suffered by other cities will help you discover your weaknesses and develop specific tactics to prepare your organization.

**Respond quickly and completely.** Wishfully thinking that the problem will go away if you don’t respond is one of the top blunders made by agencies under fire. News coverage today continues around the clock. If a reporter unearths a juicy new nugget about your crisis, chances

are that it will appear online almost immediately. The media must have 24/7 access to your spokesperson, who in turn must have the latest crisis updates. Your response can’t be solely reactionary. Continually monitor every print, broadcast and online news source covering your crisis, modify your strategy if necessary and actively seek ways to get your message out using every available tool.

### **Don’t speak unless you’re prepared.**

City staff members who consent to interviews without thoroughly thinking

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through their comments or who speculate about the crisis often make a bad situation worse. Interviews are tense settings under the best circumstances, but when the city is under fire it’s impossible to think strategically. Without preparation, multiple city spokespersons can inadvertently provide conflicting information and inject even more controversy.

### **Keep your public information officials (PIO) or spokesperson in the loop.**

Although many cities don’t have a professionally trained PIO, virtually all have at least one staff member who regularly answers media inquiries or wears the PIO hat. That spokesperson must have full access to top city decision-makers during the crisis — even meetings where they usually would be excluded — so they can understand the nuances of the crisis, offer media relations advice and be fully informed when they conduct interviews or prepare statements. This is the time to break down the usual reporting relationships and organizational barriers and move into full crisis-management mode.

### **Get your information into the mix.**

Reporters gather information from numerous places, with bloggers and other sometimes wildly inaccurate online sources adding immediate and abundant new fuel to the fire. The “good old days” when

an agency could attempt to control information are long gone. Progressive city officials realize that plenty of internal and external fountains of knowledge are eager to share everything they know about the issue. Make sure that your information is always in the mix by responding in a timely fashion through the media and the city’s own communication vehicles.

### **Assume a crisis is around the corner.**

Stuff happens, and at some point it will happen to your city. It might be tomorrow or next month, but you’ll inevitably find yourself knee-

deep in a situation that will turn your city upside down. A crisis communications plan offers the logical first step in preparation, but ongoing training and updating are essential to the plan’s success. Uncomfortable as it may be, assessing your city’s vulnerabilities (for staff and elected/appointed officials) and

drilling a simulated difficult situation with potentially involved staff provides the best way to test your readiness.

### **You need the media to tell your story.**

We all have war stories about perceived unfair treatment by the press, but clamping down on media access during a crisis is a guaranteed way to ensure that your side of the story never sees the light of day. A Thoughtful, strategic response delivered consistently and professionally through numerous venues — including those that frequently oppose the city — ensures that your residents hear your messages. There is simply no other way to rebuild public confidence in the wake of a crisis.

### **Choose the right spokesperson.**

Throwing an inexperienced staff member in front of microphones and cameras with out training and preparation produces a predictable damaging result. Anyone designated to represent the city through the media must thoroughly understand the unique elements of an interview, how to deliver messages and not just answer questions, and how to manage the onslaught of interview requests. You must also consider who will best connect with the public — the mayor, the city manager, a public safety chief or other spokesperson.

Crises have a fairly predictable lifespan, including an initial phase when there are many questions and few answers, a middle phase when you actively deliver your messages and visibly deal with the situation, and an ending phase when business begins to normalize and you seek to restore your city's credibility.

## PHASES OF THE CRISIS

The initial phase occurs immediately after you first learn about the crisis, and it requires key staff to gather quickly to consider these important questions:

- What happened and who will be affected?
- How did it happen?
- What is the city's position and what action is it taking?
- Who needs to be informed?
- Are there political or other high-profile aspects?
- What internal and external resources can help the city communicate?
- How will the situation evolve and what can be done to keep it from getting worse?
- Who is the primary spokesperson?

The middle phase, which follows several hours to several days after the crisis first surfaces, raises questions that may overwhelm your staff:

- What messages do we want to deliver?
- How do we get the messages out?
- How do we cope with Public Records Act requests?
- What is the effect on the city work force?
- Is the city's ability to deliver services compromised?
- Is media coverage or public commentary accurate?
- How do we change inaccurate perceptions of the city's role in the crisis?
- What are we doing to demonstrate that this won't happen again?

The ending phase is often when you can breathe a sigh of relief in recognition that the worst is behind you. It doesn't mean your work is done, however, and these questions will help guide your ongoing efforts:

- Are we ready for the next crisis?
- What should we do differently?
- With whom do we need to maintain long-term contact?
- How do we report our progress to our target audiences?
- Who provided good judgment from within the city and how can we put that to ongoing use?
- What needs to be done to earn the public's confidence?

## AUDIENCES AND TACTICS

Although the steps to crafting a communications plan have been outlined in a previous *Western City* article ("Managing More Effectively With a Strategic Communications Plan," online at [www.westerncity.com](http://www.westerncity.com)), it's helpful to emphasize essential audiences and tactics that should be included in a crisis-specific strategy.

As you anticipate whom you need to communicate with, consider everyone who will be impacted, such as:

- City employees, elected officials and commissioners;
- Community opinion leaders who influence large numbers of residents;
- Business owners and operators;
- Officials of nearby and partner public agencies;
- Seniors and parents;
- Homeowners associations and other community groups; and
- Investors, particularly if it's a finance-related crisis.

Tactics are the tools that help get the message out externally and internally, including:

- Media relations — still the most efficient way to reach large numbers of residents;
- Small group meetings at city hall and in the neighborhoods;
- Face-to-face with anyone who has a question or comment — the single best way to gain credibility;
- Consistent messaging on blogs and social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter; and
- A Q&A document written in easy-to-understand language.

It's challenging to think about scandals that could severely erode public trust in your city and place you in the position of digging out of a deep credibility hole for months or years. But nobody ever claimed that innovative city management was easy, and its core responsibilities include anticipating the worst, planning for it and executing the plan during the city's darkest hours. With these tools, you can jump-start your crisis communications planning. Your next steps may not be enjoyable, but they'll prove invaluable when "the call" comes into your office. ■

## TYPES OF CRISES

When thinking ahead and planning for a potential crisis, consider this list of situations, issues or events that may effect your agency:

- Agency investigation;
- Controversial lawsuit;
- Accusation of discrimination based on race, sexual preference or gender;
- Serious injury to employee or resident;
- Protest;
- Strike;
- Physical violence between co-workers;
- Theft;
- Embezzlement;
- Lavish or inappropriate spending by staff or elected/appointed officials;
- Death of top staff or elected/appointed officials;
- Arrest of official for driving under the influence;
- Top official caught lying;
- Natural disaster, such as an earthquake, flood or wildfire;
- Plane crash;
- Train crash;
- Major service interruption;
- Computer system issues, including loss of data or stolen data;
- Employee accused of high-profile crime;
- Sexual harassment case;
- Explosion;
- Rape on agency property or in agency facility;
- Chemical spill;
- Radiation leak;
- Oil spill;
- Facility closing;
- Union grievance; and
- Transportation issues, including roadway closure or public transit shutdown.

## TIPS FOR PREPARING AN INITIAL “HOLDING” STATEMENT

The public information staff assigned to preparing materials should write an initial holding statement at the onset of the incident. Reporters will likely call before all the facts have been gathered. In such an instance, a simple statement acknowledging the situation helps to avoid giving a “no comment” response and acknowledges that the city recognizes the need to cooperate with the media and inform the public. This document becomes the foundation for all future written communications about the crisis. By following a few basic principles when writing the holding statement or news releases, the city will better meet the news media’s needs.

1. Tell the most important information in the lead paragraph.
2. Answer four of the five “Ws” — who, what, where and when. Explain **what** the incident is. Identify **who** is involved in the incident as well as the resources and equipment involved. Tell **where** and **when** the incident occurred. Explain **what** action the city is taking to mitigate or respond to the incident. Do not explain **why** the event occurred unless complete information is available and has been approved. Attempting to explain the **why** without complete information is merely irresponsible speculation and can seriously undermine communication efforts.
3. Write the remaining information in descending order of importance. If the media cuts off the bottom of your story, they will omit information that is least important to the public.
4. Explain technical points in simple language. A direct quote can add the human element to otherwise technical information and help explain a situation or event in layperson’s terms. Tell the real story, and avoid using language that is overly bureaucratic.
5. Be concise. A good news release is judged by the quality of information it communicates, not by its length.

## A CRISIS CHECKLIST

The following checklist provides a quick reference for action when a crisis strikes.

### *Within the First 60 Minutes*

- Contain the immediate crisis.
  - Ensure that calls have been made to all appropriate emergency responders.
  - Coordinate and cooperate with emergency responders.
- Follow your city’s internal notification process.
  - Notify the city manager’s office and elected/appointed officials.
  - Notify appropriate department directors.
- Hold the first meeting or conference call to quickly assess and gather known facts.
  - What happened?
  - How did it happen?
  - When did it happen?
  - What was the cause?
  - Were there any injuries?
  - What was the extent of the damage?
  - Is there any current or ongoing danger?
  - What recovery efforts are under way?
- Notify front line staff to direct calls from the media, community, government and family members to administrative support, an appropriate team member or a prerecorded voice mailbox.
- Notify the appropriate staff of the possibility that reporters and media crews may show up. Direct the media to a predetermined holding area, if possible.
- Organize a public information response, based on what is known. Discuss whether to wait for more information or communicate proactively.
- Draft an appropriate holding statement, press release and talking points (samples are available online with this article at [www.westerncity.com](http://www.westerncity.com)).
- Draft a potential Q&A document.
- Reach out to and coordinate with outside agencies.
- Determine if outside experts are needed.
- Provide the initial holding statement to the media.

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