



Online Article by Dr Linda Vining

Managing the Media During a Crisis at School

Accidents, criticism and sensational allegations are likely to hit a school at any time. How you handle the media during a crisis can make a huge difference to the reputation of your school.

The first words are simple ... and alarming ... a phone call ... “Central Media Network here ... our camera crew is on its way ... is it true that a student was seriously injured at your school?”

The crisis is upon you

Surprise stuns you. There is never enough reliable information. Events escalate. There is intense scrutiny from outside, from inside, from neighbours and community leaders. Confusing and conflicting patterns, shifting like quicksand can easily produce a siege mentality and panic.

The short-term spasm will pass but the long-term perception of the school will be decided by the way in which the school handles the crisis. Any interaction with the media represents both a threat and an opportunity.

If you become a media target you can attempt to merely parry the threat, or you can turn it around so that your school emerges with a stronger reputation than it had before.

Be Ready

In calm weather assemble a “nightmare team”. List everything that could possibly go wrong and how to approach it. Talk to key people in at-risk areas and ask how

they would head off such disasters, what they would do if one occurred. Prepare a list of contacts with home and work phone numbers, email and mobile contacts, emergency services and local press.

Confidence in management

The essential element in crisis management is for the Principal to communicate confidence and a take-charge approach by attending to the following:

To the press, accidents don't just happen. They are caused by someone who is "guilty".

Information Flow

The flow of information must be centralised and controlled. It is the Principal's job to

protect the health of the school and act as the ONLY spokesperson, unless other arrangements are put in place. School policy needs to be very clear on this and students and parents need to know the policy.

Crisis Team - Convene a top-level crisis team and relieve members of other duties. Their first job is to collect precise information on the crisis. Options for action are needed. Map out a worst-case scenario keeping an eye on the horizon as well as the immediate step in front. In a crisis the tendency is to focus exclusively on the emergency. For the school's future, that is only part of the problem. How well you improvise in the face of the unexpected, and how well you control the unleashed forces

will be the criteria by which the school is judged.

Image making or breaking

In a crisis situation the media seeks a quick, concise, newsworthy response. Failure to respond quickly gives an impression to the outside world of indecisive and incompetent management.

The worst reaction is to suppress information and deny comment. It only encourages rumours to spread on all sides. Worse still, it may be interpreted as a cover-up. The media will chase information from other sources. If you provide rapid and credible data yourself you remain in control and deflate rumours.

The press can smell a cover-up even when none exists!

Rapid spread of information

Your most deadly enemy in a crisis is confusion.

If you tell your story to six journalists you will have six different interpretations of the crisis. Therefore it's very important not to rely on the media to inform significant others of the situation. Directly address your key audiences with precise information. Students, parents, staff, local residents and prospective families must not

be overlooked. They need assurance that the Principal is in control of the crisis and reassurance that they/their children are safe.

Tips for coping with tough reporters

Beware of "off the record" comments. If you don't want it repeated, don't say it. Don't be sarcastic or lose your temper.

You'll lose audience support if you put reporters down, or try to outsmart them, and they may lose face and be hostile.

Never repeat a negative because you will give it double exposure. Correct the negatives in a positive way. Keep your answers simple. Stick to the known facts and don't embellish or speculate what has happened and what might happen.

Don't allow yourself to be pushed around by a reporter. Take time to answer, think first and say what YOU want to say, even if it does not directly answer the journalist's question.

Don't be afraid of silence. Do not feel you have to fill a conversation gap. Say what you want to say and no more. Watch other people being interviewed on TV and give each a critical rating and learn to distinguish good tactics from bad.

Preparing for a crisis

To be ready for a crisis there are things to settle in advance. The following questions will help you prepare

What message do you want to emerge from your crisis? (e.g. united school community, strong decisive leadership, a school in control in a crisis)

Are all members of the school community (teachers, staff, parents, council members) aware that the Principal is the only spokesperson for the school in a time of crisis, unless otherwise arranged?

Who will form the crisis team? How will they operate?

What is the system for rapid and precise information delivery to all audiences to prevent panic?

Does every member of staff have a written policy on crisis management?

If you don't like what the reporters write, never send a nasty, defensive email to the media in response. This is dangerous and unproductive. Be careful about letters to the editor in the middle of a crisis. They can be turned against you.

Buy time to mobilise your response

When the alarm sounds and the call comes through you can say that the Principal is not available just now, but promise to get back to the caller. Ascertain when the information is needed and make sure you return the call. You can keep the media on hold for a short time to give you space to think and gather information. Honour your promise or they will hunt for information elsewhere.

A show of support

Call on your allies in the difficult days of a crisis. At a time when the school's judgment or competence may be questioned, outside support from community leaders, educational professionals and parents can create a positive show of confidence in the management of the school.

Rebuild your reputation

Once the media glare dies down you have to work on re-establishing your reputation and your position in the education marketplace. Invest in ways to get the good news about your school out to the public. Increase the amount you spend on advertising, submit editorials to the media and buy advertorial space to highlight the positive aspects of your school. Use the social networks on the internet.

Make sure your website is up-to-date and looking good as you will receive many hits during a crisis.

Get out into the community and talk face-to-face with people so they can see another side. For example, attend expos and use the platform to showcase the quality of your product. Put your students on show in the local community. Participate in local events and festivals. Be seen and be heard more widely.

Schedule an open day or a community event where you can invite outsiders to step inside and experience your school first-hand.

Are you ready to handle a crisis?

Many schools only think of image management when things go wrong but a smart marketing office is building community appreciation all the time.

You never know when this will be helpful.

Accidents, criticism, sensational allegations and embarrassing

situations are likely at any time. An organisation with a good image and positive community awareness is in a strong position to weather a storm. No magic blanket can shelter a school from crisis, however there is much that can be done to prepare for a crisis. Having worked through the questions in the table you will be better prepared to cope with one.

Managing bad news

Given the total population of a school and its range of activities it is inevitable that a crisis is going to happen from time to time and it is largely going to be in the human tragedy area. Each crisis is different, so don't expect to slavishly follow a predetermined plan when something happens. Plans, contacts and information are important but there is

A good crisis happens in an instant. But it takes months to prepare for.

also the need to think creatively and instinctively when a crisis erupts.

Start by following the public relations rule. Deliver accurate information as promptly and truthfully as possible. Then do all you can for the people involved. Provide counselling for those in shock, allow free phone calls, invite distressed parties to use your office or home, make arrangements for recovery time whereby a student's work will not suffer. Bring in grief or trauma specialists. Change the rules to suit the situation.

Be quick to set up an appeal for financial assistance if appropriate, and call on the school community to assist by providing comfort, a listening ear for the distressed and protection for those in need.

Human warmth and contact is vital for those involved in trauma, particularly young people. Make sure they are not left alone. Long after the drama has faded it will be the kindness, care and flexibility that the school extended in unusual circumstances that will be remembered and retold.

Further reading

Marketing Matters in Schools by Linda Vining. See Chapter 17, ***Working With The Media*** and also page 81, for an analysis of how Wesley School in New Zealand handled the media during a crisis.

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