

# Casting your crisis plan: Five roles you cannot leave unassigned in your crisis plans

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One of the more damaging weaknesses in crisis response is undefined roles and assignments for top management. This critical gap in planning results in the mismanagement of crisis response efforts and occurs too frequently in the plans, responses and scenarios I review with clients.

In the course of directing a client's crisis response, analyzing past reactions or developing powerful response strategies, it's clear that prompt, effective crisis response depends on having five essential responsibilities carefully spelled out for top executives:

## 1. Assert the moral authority expected of ethical leadership.

No matter how devastating a crisis is, in most cultures forgiveness is possible provided the organization, through its early behaviors and leadership, takes appropriate and expected steps to learn from and deal with the issues. The behav-



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iors are:

**Candor and disclosure** — acknowledgement that something adverse has happened or is happening.

**Explanation and revelation** — early analysis of the nature of the problem.

**Commitment to communicate** — even if there are lots of critics.

**Answer the questions.**

**Empathy** — intentional acts of helpfulness and compassion.

**Oversight** — letting outsiders, even victims, know how you're reacting.

**Commitment to zero** — finding ways to prevent similar events from occurring.

**Apology** — acceptance of responsibility.

**Restitution or penance** — paying the price; generally doing more than would be expected.

## 2. Take responsibility for the care of victims.

The most crucial element in crisis management, aside from ending the victimizing event, is managing the victim dimension. There are only three kinds of victims: people, animals and living systems. Top management is responsible to

take appropriate steps to care for their needs. This both preserves reputation and reduces litigation. The worst responses to crises are when victims' needs go unfulfilled or the organization refuses to ease the pain of those afflicted. Of all of the CEO's responsibilities, actively caring for those affected is the most important. Maintain a positive, constructive pressure to get victim issues resolved promptly.

**3. Set the appropriate tone for the organizational response.** Tone is determined by management behavior and helps the organization meet the expectations triggered by a crisis. If senior management is defensive, the entire organization will be too. Setting a constructive tone encourages positive attitudes and prompt responses that will protect the organization's relationships during the recovery period, show respect for victims and reduce reputation damage.

## 4. Set the organization's voice.

Put a face and a voice on the organization as it moves through the crisis for external audiences. Tell how we describe the organization, what we are doing, how the response is going, what responsibilities we are taking and what outside scrutiny we are inviting. Use positive language, be helpful, and suggest early resolution.

Avoid demeaning or discrediting anyone. A major leadership communication goal is to avoid producing critics and opponents.

**5. Lead at every level.** Leaders need to act like leaders during urgent situations. Literally walk around and talk to people. Focus everyone on the ultimate response process goals. Ninety percent of senior-executive activities should have executives out being leaders and motivators of empathy, not huddling in their offices.

Of all of these, preventing similar occurrences will most help victims come to closure and prove that litigation and other forms of public humiliation are not necessary.

All crises are management problems first. Planning and rehearsing executive actions can avoid career-deflating moments, making it important to include specific executive instructions in all plans and response scenarios. **T**

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**Want to learn more?** Join the author in a 90-minute PRSA teleseminar on this concept called **"Building Effective Crisis Plans," Oct. 30, 3 - 4:30 p.m. EDT.** Visit [www.prsa.org](http://www.prsa.org) for more information and to register.

This teleseminar provides 1.0 Maintenance Credit toward the minimum of 10 credits required to maintain your APR. Please contact Kathy Mulvihill at PRSA: (212) 460-1436 or [kathy.mulvihill@prsa.org](mailto:kathy.mulvihill@prsa.org). **T**



**James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, CCEP,** helps clients deal with sensitive high-profile situations. His most recent book is *"Why Should the Boss Listen to You?"* (Jossey-Bass.) Details: [www.e911.com](http://www.e911.com).