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## **SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT: A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS AND PLANNING MODEL ©**

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The most challenging part of crisis communication management is reacting – with the right response – quickly. This is because behavior always precedes communication. Non-behavior or inappropriate behavior leads to [spin, not communication](#). In emergencies, it's the non-action and the resulting spin that cause embarrassment, humiliation, prolonged visibility, and unnecessary litigation.

Helping management understand the impact of [inappropriate or poorly](#) thought out crisis response is one of the most important strategic services the public relations practitioner can provide. To have a strategic discussion requires a tool that has value without insulting the executive's intelligence, has impact without belaboring the obvious, inspires action without oversimplifying, and illustrates options and choices without teaching unnecessary, ill-advised lessons in public relations.

Examining the dimensions of a crisis, which executives can clearly recognize and relate to, helps the public relations counselor provide truly meaningful, strategic advice. It is this kind of analytical approach that helps senior management avoid career-defining moments, unless the moments are deserved.

### **The Dimensions of a Crisis**

True crises have several critical dimensions in common, any one of which, if handled poorly, can disrupt or perhaps destroy best efforts at managing any remaining opportunities to resolve the situation and recover, rehabilitate, or retain reputation. Failure to respond and communicate in ways that meet [community standards and expectations](#) will result in a series of negative outcomes. This article focuses on seven critical dimensions of crisis communication management:

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1. Operations;
  2. Victims;
  3. Trust/credibility;
  4. Behavior;
  5. Professional expectations;
  6. Ethics; and
  7. Lessons learned.

The graphic approach used here resonates well with busy senior executives. It provides a useful series of discussible strategies and decision possibilities when adapted to a relevant, critical business scenario. For the crisis communication management strategist, it helps develop frameworks for testing proposed response behaviors and forecasting intended and unintended consequences and collateral damage.

## **The Scenario**

Four days after visiting the local BurgerMax for a neighbor child's birthday party, Mary Ellen Mead lay dying in an intensive-care hospital bed (BurgerMax is a fictional regional publicly held chain of 31 fast food shops specializing in fairly typical burger/chicken/fish entrées). Three children at the party had already passed away; six others, including two adults, were in critical condition and failing.

A deadly E.coli bacterium was racing through Mary Ellen's kidneys and liver. The odds were against her and the other victims, the doctors said.

Mead, a 31-year-old mother of a three-year old daughter, and the others at the party were in danger of joining the 100 to 200 people who die in the United States each year from E.coli 0157:H7, a dangerous strain of the common bacteria. The source was undercooked hamburger patties.

"They kept pulling my husband out of the hospital room. I didn't know what they were saying, but I knew something was very serious," Mead recalled recently about her August 1998 brush with death. "Later, I found out they were telling him he should prepare himself, that there was a really good chance I was not going to make it through the night. My liver had completely failed and they told him if it didn't come back in a day or two, I was going to die. Then they told him about the other children."<sup>1</sup>

For several days Mead hovered near death before her condition turned. After 10 days in intensive care, she resumed eating. Eight days later she went home. Four children and two adults died during the same period.

BurgerMax is a regional publicly held chain of 31 fast food shops specializing in fairly typical burger/chicken/fish entrées.

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## The Timeline

*Day One:* The media and customers call and ask about the children and parents who are getting sick. BurgerMax denies any responsibility and refuses to talk with the families except through an attorney. Intense media speculation forces the company to make public statements and to issue a news release. Company officials did call in the state department of health.

*Day Two:* Continued media speculation forces BurgerMax to acknowledge that something might have happened and that it might have been the cause. “If it was our burgers,” more than likely, the company said, “it was the fault of the supplier who provided contaminated meat.” The company cautioned the media to be responsible and not to start a panic. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was already examining the supplier’s facilities.

*Day Three:* The first child dies. The state department of health suggests a shutdown of all BurgerMax restaurants for inspection and sanitizing. The company agrees to shut down the three restaurants where victims had eaten. Families of the victims hold a news conference demanding that BurgerMax take responsibility. BurgerMax runs ads saying, “It’s just an isolated incident,” “We follow the law,” “Come on down and enjoy a MammothMax.” BurgerMax releases a statement condemning the federal meat inspection program. “This might not have happened had there been more qualified federal inspectors.”

*Day Four:* Two more children die. The state department of health reports that cooking temperatures were probably too low to kill the bacteria. BurgerMax says, “We followed all approved procedures”; “Food safety is our number one concern”; “If the meat had not been contaminated by our suppliers, there would not have been problems in our restaurants”; “The entire U.S. meat inspection system needs to be examined.”

*Day Five:* Another death. BurgerMax announces it will sponsor a national study of food safety with the National Restaurant Association and the National Franchise Restaurant Association. It contributes \$100,000 to the study, declaring that federal meat inspection is a “national problem.” Two former employees, speaking anonymously, suggest that they may have, “cut a corner or two,” especially during busy times. “Managers just looked the other way.”

*Day Six:* Two more deaths. The families of the first victims announce litigation against BurgerMax and demand a criminal investigation. The company announces a plan to help victim families obtain assistance more easily. The state department of health announces it will thoroughly investigate all 31 BurgerMax restaurants.

## Applying the Dimensions

Using this scenario, let’s do an analysis using each of the seven critical dimensions. Each requires affirmative management decision making as a part of the process of surviving the situation. You will see some duplication in recommendations or observations, mostly because bad news is repeated in different ways and in different places unless it is dealt with conclusively, promptly.

## I. The operations dimension

Regaining public confidence following a damaging situation first requires [operating decisions](#) that alleviate the community’s anguish; restore confidence in the brand, organization, individual, or activity; and rebuild relationships – especially with the victims – while at the same time reducing media coverage of the story because the organization, which created the situation, is actually *doing* what the community expects.

Over the years I’ve developed a series of standard operating behaviors that seem to meet the criteria for re-establishing community support. The reality is that for truly serious situations, the perpetrators will need to take each of the seven actions *before* public confidence will return. The optimum order in which they need to be taken is shown here. It is not possible to skip a step. In fact, the faster these actions are taken, in the correct order, the more quickly there will be less anger from victims, fewer bad feelings from employees, less litigation, and less media coverage. Companies that behave appropriately and solve problems promptly are neither newsworthy nor suable. To resolve the crisis situation completely *each* one of these operational actions *will be* taken.

<b>Urgent Crisis Management Operating Responses</b>	<b>BurgerMax Damaging Behaviors</b>	<b>Correct Approaches</b>
<p><b>1. Candor:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outward recognition through promptly verbalized public acknowledgement that a problem exists; that people or groups of people, the environment, or the public trust is affected; and that something will be done to remediate the situation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Released self-serving messages and communication.</li> <li>• Made assumptions about the truth without really knowing what the truth was.</li> <li>• Failed to accept responsibility.</li> <li>• Shifted the blame to others in an attempt to deflect criticism.</li> <li>• Disparaged the media and government agencies.</li> <li>• Viewed the outbreak as a “PR” problem.</li> <li>• Issued news releases that were self-serving.</li> <li>• Hid behind weak arguments, e.g., “average temperature” and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It’s our fault.”</li> <li>• “It shouldn’t have happened.”</li> <li>• “We are helping the families through these terrible times.”</li> <li>• “We will relentlessly examine every aspect of our business to find out what happened, to fix it, talk about it, and see that it won’t happen again.”</li> <li>• Use appropriate spokespeople with statements. Avoid news releases.</li> <li>• Stand up and answer the questions.</li> </ul>

“complied with federal standards,” and gave the appearance of minimizing its role in the harm that was done.

- Act to find the cause.

**2. Explanation (no matter how silly, stupid, or embarrassing the problem causing error was):**

- Promptly and briefly explain why the problem occurred and the known underlying reasons or behaviors that led to the situation (even if there is only partial early information).
- Talk about what was learned from the situation and how it will influence the organization’s future behavior.
- Unconditionally commit to regularly report additional information until it is all out, or until no public interest remains.

- Created conflict (“We don’t know what the cause is, but eat here anyway”) around the source of the problem, which lead to public confusion.
- The company perceived itself as a victim, its supplier as the perpetrator, the government and media as persecutors.
- [Shifted blame](#) and [responsibility](#) to a failed federal inspection system.
- Refused to admit that it wasn’t prepared for what could easily be recognized as a critical vulnerability to the public health.
- “We can’t act until we have all the facts.”
- “You can’t prepare for everything.”

- Find the truth.
- Take conclusive action: Close the stores.
- Talk about the victims and their families.
- Act like a neighbor.
- Commit to the obvious, e.g., we weren’t ready for this.
- Keep focused on solving the local problem.
- Release information incrementally, constantly.
- Immediately correct erroneous information with more current, more accurate information.

**3. Declaration:**

- A public commitment and discussion of specific, positive steps to be taken conclusively address the issues and resolve the situation.

- [Stonewalled with a scripted, insensitive, overly technical, and irrelevant operational response.](#)
- Failed to bring in truly independent resources or independent expertise to the situation.
- Waffled about helping others. Saying, “We’ll do the right thing,” while not doing anything.

- Talk from the victims’ point of view.
- Minimize the technical “stuff.”
- Be explicit about doing what ever it takes for the victims.
- Avoid disingenuous phrases:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted no serious, credible, independent external investigation.</li> <li>• Inadequate implementation of very late recall (lost 15 cases of hamburgers).</li> <li>• No commitment to fix recall plan deficiencies.</li> </ul>	<p>“... if we could turn the clock back . . .”</p> <p>“... if we had only known . . .”</p> <p>“... these things happen, unfortunately . . .”</p> <p>“... we’ll set new standards, for everyone . . .”</p> <p>“... we didn’t want to cause panic. . .”</p> <p>“... the media sensationalize everything . . .”</p>
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<p><b>4. Contrition:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The continuing verbalization of regret, empathy, sympathy, even embarrassment. Take appropriate responsibility for having allowed the situation to occur in the first place, whether by omission, commission, accident, or negligence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Took only conditional responsibility.</li> <li>• Selfish focus on shareholder concerns and customer retention.</li> <li>• Used a news release to announce its sympathy.</li> <li>• <a href="#">Expressed only conditional regret:</a></li> </ul> <p>“We’re sorry, <i>but</i> . . . it was the supplier.”</p> <p>“We’re sorry, <i>but</i> . . . we didn’t want to create a panic.”</p> <p>“We’re sorry, <i>but</i> . . . we didn’t know about the new regulations because the state didn’t do a good job of telling us.”</p> <p>“We’re sorry, <i>but</i> . . . the federal government didn’t diligently inform us.”</p> <p>“Nothing was wrong <i>but</i> . . . we will change our quality testing procedures anyway.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk and act like someone that you care about has been hurt.</li> <li>• Meet with families.</li> <li>• Take the families of victims to church.</li> <li>• Let employees speak for the company.</li> <li>• Involve employees with each victim family.</li> <li>• Use empathetic language.</li> <li>• Express unconditional sympathy.</li> </ul>
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<p><b>5. Consultation:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promptly ask for help and counsel from victims,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Never asked for input from the victims.</li> <li>• Initially blamed the government.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announce an unassailable panel of independent experts to study, recommend, and report publicly.</li> </ul>
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government, and the community of origin – even from opponents.

Directly involve and request the participation of those most directly affected to help develop more permanent solutions, more acceptable behaviors, and to design principles and approaches that will preclude similar problems from occurring.

- Used a “voluntary” internal investigation as a cover to avoid scrutiny.
- Never asked suppliers to participate or contribute to the resolution of the problem.
- Kept its distance from government inspectors; viewed regulators as an enemy.

- Let government agencies do the talking, while you concentrate on solving the problem.
- Establish a vendor advisory group.
- Help victims speak out and make suggestions.

#### 6. Commitment:

- Publicly set organizational goals at zero.

Zero errors.  
Zero defects.  
Zero dumb decisions.  
Zero problems.

Publicly promise that to the best of the organization’s ability similar situations will never occur or reoccur.

- Made absolutely no attempt to commit to zero.
- Completely ignored the concept of zero:  
“Zero isn’t possible”.  
“We can’t promise no future mistakes.”  
“There is risk in everything people do.”

- Establish a permanent, broadly representative advisory group to assure the public of the company’s intentions on an ongoing basis.

#### 7. Restitution:

- Find a way to quickly pay the price.
- Make or require restitution.
- Go beyond community and victim expectations and what would be required under normal circumstances to remediate the problem.
- Adverse situations remediated quickly cost far less

- Stalled and delayed victim compensation yet gave \$100,000 to a trade association for research.
- Only did the absolute minimum required.
- Limited contact with victim families.
- Required receipts and a validation process for all reimbursements.

- Exceed community expectations:
  - Close all restaurants the night they learned of the possible problem.
  - Take direct, immediate, quiet action to address and alleviate victims’ concerns and fears.
  - Immediately establish an independently administered fund to cover short- and

and are controversial for much shorter periods of time.

long-term medical, related, and follow-up costs for victims and their families.

Note: The check written today will be the smallest check written. *Checks will be written.*

## II. The Victim Management Dimension

When organizational action creates involuntary adverse circumstances for people or institutions, victims are created. Victims have a special mentality and their perception and behavior is altered in ways that are fundamentally predictable. Victims designate themselves. They also determine when they are no longer victims.

The perpetrator needs to [recognize victim expectations and respond affirmatively](#). Otherwise there may be very negative consequences. For example, victims may resist reasonable solutions, use the media to communicate heart-wrenching stories, or begin high-profile litigation. Closure becomes very difficult. Disgruntled former employees and well-meaning current employees often come forward to verify victim allegations. Victims don't usually hear much beyond their own pain. Say less but make it important and worth hearing.

Victims move through [recognizable cycles](#) as they work to resolve the situation in which they have involuntarily become a part.

### **Cycle I: Recognition of Impact**

- Agony, search for the “reason this happened.”
- Anger.
- Concern over lack of response.
- Disbelief, dread.
- Expectation of help.
- Frustration at “intentional delays.”

### **Victims Need:**

- Assistance with grief.
- Expression of regret.
- Involvement.
- Information.
- Recognition.

### **BurgerMax:**

- Considered victims a part of the federal inspection/supplier problem.
- Made participation difficult.
- Patronized families.
- Reduced death to a press release.
- Was embarrassed into taking more empathic action.

<p><b>Cycle II: Seeking Retribution</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek or attempt to implement their own solutions.</li> <li>• Feeling that help received is inadequate, late, and insincere.</li> <li>• Hitting back.</li> <li>• Search for the obviously guilty.</li> <li>• Turn to the plaintiff’s bar to get retribution.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Victims Need:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information about actions taken.</li> <li>• Validation of their suffering.</li> <li>• Honesty from the organization.</li> <li>• To hear apologies from the top of the organization.</li> <li>• Prompt response.</li> <li>• Direct communication.</li> </ul>	<p><b>BurgerMax:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delayed payment.</li> <li>• Made victims guess about help.</li> <li>• Gave \$100,000 to a trade association for research.</li> <li>• Trivialized victim suffering.</li> <li>• Made victims provide receipts.</li> <li>• Used low-level PR people to spin.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cycle III: Severely Distorted Recollection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “No one understands what I’m going through.”</li> <li>• “They could have done more, faster.”</li> <li>• “Growing sense of helplessness.”</li> <li>• A permanent sense of anger with endless analysis.</li> <li>• Fearful worrying about the future.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Victims Need:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life rebuilding assistance.</li> <li>• Ongoing counsel.</li> <li>• Outcome-focused action.</li> <li>• Understanding.</li> <li>• Contact with accident/death site.</li> </ul>	<p><b>BurgerMax:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No ongoing relationship with victims to provide closure and healing.</li> </ul>

### III. The trust and credibility dimension

Credibility is conferred by others based on an organization’s past behavior. When bad things happen, past behavior is used to predict future actions. When past behaviors have been good and helpful, and current and future behaviors don’t match those expectations, there’s a loss of credibility.

Trust is the absence of fear. Fear results from unexpected injury caused by circumstances or by someone or something that was previously trusted. Fear is the most powerful human emotion to remediate. When there is physical injury or death, it may be impossible to do more than attempt to reduce the fear. Left unattended, fear turns to frustration, anger, then to retribution. Here are seven trust-building, fear-reducing, credibility-fixing behaviors:

- Provide advance information.
- Ask for input.
- Listen carefully.

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- Demonstrate that you've heard, i.e., change your plans.
  - Stay in touch.
  - Speak in plain language.
  - Bring victims/involuntary participants into the decision-making process.

### **How BurgerMax used these behaviors:**

1. Stalled and delayed in getting information to the victims and to the public.
2. Never had a good grasp on exactly what information would be useful to the victims:
  - What to do if you're experiencing symptoms;
  - How to get more information about E.coli; and
  - Exactly what BurgerMax was going to do to make the situation right?
3. Only looked internally for expertise. Didn't seek help from external resources.
4. Rejected recommendations for an advisory board.
5. Blamed consultants, government, and suppliers for what was ultimately its own responsibility.
6. Listened with a corporate ear; heard only the financial markets.
7. Responded financially first, "This will cost a lot of money." Promised to help but then delayed payments.
8. Had little or no follow-up with victims. Concentrated follow-up efforts with the state, but only because the company was required to do so.
9. Relied on technical language to support its position that suppliers contaminated the meat and also to explain why it wasn't adequately prepared to manage this crisis. Seemed to have no understanding of risks associated with this bacterial strain; maintained that the problem was not its fault. Appeared to be testing its legal defense strategy through the news media.
10. Never considered the victims as BurgerMax victims, but rather as victims of a faulty federal inspection system and a non-compliant supplier. Ignored the fact that its employees felt like victims as well.

### **Behaviors that illustrate credibility:**

1. Prepare to talk openly.
2. Reveal what the public should know, even if they don't ask.
3. Explain problems and changes quickly.

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4. Answer all questions, even those that victims wouldn't think to ask.
  5. Cooperate with the media, recognizing that victims and employees have a higher priority.
  6. Respect and seek to work with victims and opponents.

#### **How BurgerMax used these behaviors:**

1. Hid from the truth from the beginning. "Million and millions of burgers safely served."
2. Never acknowledged its role and responsibility for the outbreak, even though it subsequently raised cooking temperatures. Only provided information when forced to do so, then only a minimal amount.
3. Avoided discussing problems. Never admitted there was a question about its food handling processes. Even though it made changes to its cooking procedures, the company maintained that it had a commitment to quality all along.
4. [Ducked and stalled](#). Never answered any questions not directly asked.
5. Priorities were reversed. It was concerned mainly about business, operations, finances, and keeping customers coming through the door.
6. Ignored victims and disparaged those who criticized its actions.

#### **IV. The behavior dimension**

Post-crisis analysis involving hundreds of companies, industries, and negative circumstances reveals a pattern of unhelpful behaviors that work against rebuilding or preserving reputation, trust, and credibility. The greater the negative nature of the incident and the greater the number of victims, the more opportunities there are for trust-busting behaviors to occur. Good crisis plans are structured to work directly against, anticipate, and eliminate negative behavior patterns.

#### **Negative behaviors to plan against:**

1. Arrogance, no concern.
2. Minimize victim needs.
3. Blame shifting.

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4. Broaden situation unnecessarily (or for PR reasons).
  5. Inappropriate language.
  6. Inconsistency.
  7. [Inflammatory statements.](#)
  8. Little or no preparation.
  9. Minimize the impact.
  10. Missed opportunities to communicate with government, the public, and victims.
  11. No admission of responsibility.
  12. Victim confusion.

**How BurgerMax used these behaviors:**

1. Was concerned mostly about the financial impact.
2. Actively made situation difficult for victims. Failed to acknowledge victims.
3. Aggressively blamed suppliers, state department of health, and federal inspection system. Maintained an “anybody but us” mentality.
4. Encouraged industry initiatives to intercede, “We are the victims of the government’s lax approach to regulating the meat industry.” Gave \$100,000 for “research” rather than to compensate victims. Note: The most common truly damaging PR tactic is to create or drag in third parties.
5. Was self-serving, careless, and inhumane. Was consistently stupid and self-serving.
6. Attacked suppliers, the government, and [the media.](#)
7. Had no recall plan in place to deal with O157:H7 despite many stories in the news and in trade publications.
8. Had no crisis plan. Failed to anticipate crisis.
9. Did not communicate until overwhelmed by negative events. Then it used a completely defensive approach, “It’s isolated to just three of our 31 stores.”

- 10. Waited to communicate until forced to do so. Should have proactively communicated with the victims and others directly affected by the problem.
- 11. No admission to this day.
- 12. Though no employee died or was infected, only senior management was embarrassed and humiliated. The company felt it was the real victim.

**V. The professional expectation dimension**

What is often omitted in analyses of crisis situations is a comparison of the behaviors and actions of public relations professionals against the standards set by their industry. Increasingly in litigation, juries look to industry standards and practices to help determine a factual basis for damages and compensation. Community expectations as reflected in codes of conduct and codes of ethics are useful analytical and response tools. This section looks at the BurgerMax situation from the perspective of the Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA) *Code of Professional Standards* and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) *Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators*.

**Generally accepted industry standards:**

<b>Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) <u><i>Code of Professional Standards</i></u></b>	<b>BurgerMax:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shall conduct his/her professional life in accord with the public interest.</li> <li>• Shall exemplify high standards of honesty and integrity.</li> <li>• Shall deal fairly with the public, giving due respect to the ideal of free inquiry and to the opinions of others.</li> <li>• Shall adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth, avoiding extravagant claims or unfair comparisons.</li> <li>• Shall not knowingly disseminate false or misleading information and shall act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which he or she is responsible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priorities:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Shareholder value.</li> <li>– Customer retention.</li> <li>– Reputational salvage.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Approach:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Blameshifting to others (government, vendors, state department of health).</li> <li>– Conditional responsibility.</li> <li>– Creation of conflict to deflect criticism.</li> <li>– Escalation of outbreak to a “national problem.”</li> <li>– Arrogance and selfishness.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Outcomes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Damage to brand and vendors.</li> <li>– Unnecessary, prolonged media coverage.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- No substantive change in federal meat inspection system.
- Unnecessary victims.

**International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)**

*Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators*

- Practice honest, candid, and timely communication and foster the free flow of essential information in accord with the public interest.
- Disseminate accurate information and promptly correct any erroneous communication for which they may be responsible.
- Sensitive to cultural values and beliefs and engage in fair and balanced communication activities that foster and encourage mutual understanding.
- Refrain from taking part in any undertaking that the communicator considers to be unethical.
- Obey the laws and public policies governing their professional activities and are sensitive to the spirit of all laws and regulations and should any law or public policy be violated, for whatever reasons, act promptly to correct the situation.
- Protect confidential information and, at the same time, comply with all legal requirements for the disclosure of information affecting the welfare of others.
- Honest not only with others but also, and most importantly, with themselves as individuals; seeking the truth and speaking that truth first to the self.

**BurgerMax:**

- Viewed outbreak as a “PR” problem.
  - Used self-serving language.
  - Attempted to raise issue to the national level.
- Was media driven.
  - Used news releases to communicated information that was important only to it.
  - Used press conferences to shift the blame to others.
- Misdirected emphasis to company constituents.
  - Shareholders: Were assured that the impact of the outbreak was minimal.
  - Financial analysts: Were the first audience to be communicated with directly (through an analyst teleconference).
  - Customers: Were told via ads and press statements that it was safe to eat at BurgerMax.
- Attempted to minimize the damage.
- Failed to recognize the true victims.
  - BurgerMax viewed itself as the victim.
  - Customers who became ill were the victims of a failed federal inspection system.

## VI. The ethical dimension

There is a [moral dimension to crisis management](#). Business organizations and institutions are expected to have consciences and to act in ways that reinforce this public expectation. That’s why whenever there are victims, someone has to be held accountable.

Victims make moral ethical assessments essential. This assessment process consists of answers to a series of questions, or at least being prepared to answer these questions publicly and promptly.

When an issue involves [integrity](#) and moral or ethical dilemmas, get to the moral reasoning and questioning quickly. When the public’s deepest values are offended, extraordinarily fast action is required. Ethical issues demand the moral courage to ask difficult, tough, direct questions immediately and a commitment – the strength of heart – powerful enough to take the most appropriate action promptly. Acting on matters of principle will counter the negative impact of a situation the public, employees, and other audiences find morally troublesome. Moral issues require individuals to illustrate their personal belief systems through their behavior.

<b>Moral and Ethical Questions:</b>	<b>BurgerMax Assumptions:</b>	<b>Community Expectation Realities:</b>
1. What did they know and when did they know it?	1. Quality was fine.	1. When did Quality Assurance know about the regulatory change? Why was it not acted upon?
2. What are the relevant facts of the situation? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What decisions were made?</li> <li>• Who was involved/affected?</li> <li>• What was sacrificed to benefit the victims?</li> </ul>	2. Victims were caused by someone else’s negligence. Shareholders became the victims along with company management.	2. The decision to recall product from only 3 of 31 stores was totally unacceptable.
3. Was there a firsthand attempt to find the truth?	3. We always deal in the truth.	3. Concealed by company for “fear of releasing proprietary information.”
4. What alternative actions are available?	4. We’ll do whatever we’re forced to do to get this situation under control.	4. Take immediate action. Make public acknowledgement and take responsibility. Raise cooking temperatures.

		Move to the aid of victims. Explain what to do if ill.
5. Who would be affected?	5. Predominantly our shareholders, employees, and customers.	5. The need to clear all stores of possible contamination potential.
6. What ethical principles or standards of conduct are involved or at issue?	6. Our standards are fine. Our ethics are okay. Leave us alone so that we can fix the problem.	6. Behaved badly and in doing so, prolonged/expanded the problem. Slandered suppliers. No protection of the public interest.
7. How would these principles be advanced or violated by each alternative action?	7. It's not necessary that these be considered.	7. We expect the company to do what's right, promptly.
8. Is it really the company's problem?	8. It's a problem only because someone else screwed up.	8. It's the company's problem until it proves to us that there is no further reason to worry.
9. What is the duty to update and inform?	9. Answer only the questions that we are asked directly.	9. Tell us as much as you can, when you can, and keep telling us until we tell you we no longer need information.
10. Who should be advised or consulted?	10. Let's stay focused on those we know are directly affected.	First, the victims, then those who feel they may be affected – employees and those of us who may have purchased food at BurgerMax.
11. What was the fundamental cause – omission, commission, negligence, neglect, accident, arrogance, other?	10. It's someone else's problem, which we're obliged to fix and take the blame for.	11. All of the above.
12. How could this have been avoided?	12. Need better inspectors; select a higher quality supplier.	12. Failed to take immediate dramatic action.

13. Are all the crucial ethical questions being asked and answered?	13. This really isn't an ethical situation; it's a business problem that we've resolve by changing suppliers.	13. Temporary but significant loss of credibility and public trust until it can be re-established by the company.
14. Are the actions open, honest, and truthful?	14. We'll tell as much of the truth as our attorneys will allow.	14. Actions were closed, conditional, and beneficial only to the company.
15. What affirmative action is being taken now to remedy or remediate the situation?	15. We'll do whatever we're told to do.	15. Do whatever it takes to make us feel comfortable to dine at your stores again.
16. Is there an institutional "code of silence" when morally questionable decisions or actions come to light?	16. Probably not, we only spend as much time on this as is necessary. Besides, the public only has a limited right to know anyway.	16. As more and more disgruntled employees speak out about BurgerMax's food handling practices, clearly the company isn't telling us everything we need to know.
17. How will future unethical behavior be disclosed? To whom? How fast?	17. We may tighten some things up, but it's not really our problem.	17. We want a process in place that company management doesn't control.
18. What lessons can the organization learn as this dilemma is resolved?	18. Mainly operational information and procedural changes.	18. Ethical behavior is a leadership responsibility. Failing to act ethically is a failure to lead honorably.
19. As an organization, are we prepared to combat the behaviors that lead to ethical compromises?	19. We could be criminally prosecuted.	19. Should BurgerMax be criminally prosecuted, which is possible, it will most likely be forced to establish very rigid compliance and integrity processes. This will eradicate ethical compromises.
20. How many "typical behaviors" do we know go on that can potentially cause trouble: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lax control;</li> </ul>	20. These can't happen here.	20. If one thing turns out to be wrong, there are most likely a lot of other things that are also wrong and need to be looked into thoroughly.

- No tough, appropriate, centralized compliance;
- Underreporting of infractions;
- Leadership that allows supervisors to overlook bad behavior;
- Allowing employees to experiment with “unapproved methods”;
- Encouraging a “do whatever it takes” mentality;
- Minimizing oversight and compliance processes;
- Structuring incentives in such a way that they compromise safety, public health, or product integrity;
- Overlooking shortcuts;
- Avoiding confrontation with managers;
- Operating “on the edge”;
- Ignoring signs of rogue behavior;
- Tolerating inappropriate behavior or management by individuals who are “critical to the organization’s mission”;
- Belittling or humiliating those suggest or seek ethical standards;
- Dismissing employees who report bad or outright wrong behavior; and/or
- Demeaning the internal credibility of internal whistleblowers.

## **VII. The lessons-learned dimension**

In situations similar to the BurgerMax episode, it is ideal for the organization to plan to learn as it executes its crisis response and remedial actions. Institutional memories are short. Besides, managers detest dealing with crises, especially once the urgent issues have been identified. It’s a critical part of any crisis response process that a lessons learned approach be in place so that the institution can learn to remember the mistakes, the miscues, the successes, and

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the victories in real time – meaning contemporaneously with problem resolution. The public, especially the American public, expects organizations to talk about and describe the lessons they learned from mistakes, errors, accidents, or negligent acts. Speaking publicly about lessons learned is a major corporate step toward obtaining public and employee forgiveness.

Successfully managing future crises often depends on the intentionally created institutional memory the public relations counselor brings to the managing executive’s attention. Most crises cannot be avoided. The [lessons learned approach](#) teaches the organization how to forecast, mitigate, or perhaps even significantly reduce the likelihood of a similar situation occurring or reoccurring.

The *Lessons Learned/Case Study Outline* below lists important elements in every critical study of a crisis situation. While most of the information contained in a case study will also be in the public domain, corporate counsel may want to supervise case study development since the organization’s legal position could be affected should the information and its interpretation go to litigants through the discovery process.

#### **Lessons learned/case study outline:**

- [Ethics/compliance/standards of conduct](#)
- Events timeline
- Lessons learned
- Open questions
- Operations issues
- Recovery issues
- Relevant patterns from similar previous events
- Response timeline
- Special action(s)
- Strategy gaps/failures
- Surprises: negative/positive
- Unintended consequences
- Visibility timeline
- Variations from approved procedures

#### **The Bottom Line: Act Fast**

The repeated use of the word “promptly” in this article should clearly convey the strategic importance of acting quickly. It is often better to act quickly and make mistakes than to fail to act until it’s too late or the action becomes a meaningless gesture. In fact, solving problems and “winning” in crisis situations is a function of speed, of decision making, of action, of reaction, of collaboration, of swiftly applied common sense. Timidity and hesitation are the parents of defeat. Another word I’ve used often is “victims.” It can be safely said that if there are no victims, there is no crisis. Only people, animals, and living systems can be victims.

Now, a few words about common sense in crisis management. It’s far more complicated than it seems, but let’s look at it briefly for clarification. Common sense in crisis management has five critical components:

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- **Preauthorization:** The single most important aspect of crisis planning and crisis strategy development making decisions ahead of time so that the speed of implementation is the only issue facing managers on the scene when a crisis occurs. And, implementation speed will not become an issue if there has been adequate preparation and simulation.
  - **Conclusive action:** Most crises occur with incredible speed and leave enormous problems behind to resolve. Good crisis planning involves recognizing that no action an organization can take will have the response magnitude that the crisis itself had. Therefore, effective responses to crisis are incremental in nature. Plan to emphasize positive, conclusive increments in the response process. Each of these increments ends with certainty a portion of the crisis and limits its collateral damage.
  - **Unassailable behavior:** Too often surprise begets embarrassment, which begets fear, which begets foolish behaviors, denial, and stalling. Executives who do or say foolish, challengeable things before, during, or after a crisis slow reputation rehabilitation. What is done should be done promptly and carefully. What is said should be brief, important, and worth being heard and repeated. There are no secrets in crisis situations. Everything comes out eventually.
  - **Humane words and deeds from the start:** One of the great shortcomings in most managers is that they appear cold, arrogant, unfeeling, and corporately driven when bad things happen and there are victims. These behaviors are the source of employee anger and frustration; litigation; shareholder action; angry neighbors; and bad, embarrassing media coverage. Say you are sorry. [Apologize continually.](#) Help the victims no matter what. Treat everyone as though they were a member of your family.
  - **Personalization:** Deal directly with victims and with those indirectly affected – customers, vendors, and employees. This approach reduces the power of opponents, the self-selected outsiders, and the media. Control your own destiny. Act personally at the highest appropriate level. This puts responsibility for a solution and the opportunity for reputational rehabilitation where it belongs – with the organization that caused the problem.

Above all, avoid the infamous excuses that are dead giveaways that more serious issues lie below the surface of the crisis at hand, excuses like:

- “It’s too soon to act.”
- “It’s only competitor criticism.”
- “It’s caving into people or ideas we don’t respect.”
- “Our peers expect us to fight this.”
- “It’s just an isolated incident.”
- “The standards are unreasonable or unachievable.”
- “We need more time.”
- “Let’s not over-react.”
- “If we say something, people will find out.”
- “We obey the law.”

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- “We can’t take responsibility; we’ll be sued.”
  - “It will trigger copycats.”

Using this approach will, to some degree, box executives in by closing off some of their favorite escape routes from making critical, strategic, timely crisis management decisions.

Understand the difference between crisis communication management and crisis management. Help management understand that bad news never improves with age. Fix it now.

Ultimately, management needs a competent, conclusive, straightforward, grand strategy that makes sense in a management context while addressing the various critical dimensions any crisis causes. The elements of such a grand strategy in priority order are to:

- Deal with the problem causing the crisis;
- Assist the victims and those directly affected;
- Communicate with and enlist the support of employees.
- Inform those indirectly affected; and
- Affirmatively manage the media and other self-appointed outsiders.

The key challenge remains accomplishing most of the strategy on as many levels as [possible as quickly as possible](#).

Act with speed and honor. Help victims return to normalcy. Clarify what has been learned. Make restitution promptly. Behave as though your mother was watching and you have to explain your decisions and actions to her over dinner tonight.

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*Editor’s Note: James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, Fellow IABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, BEPS Emeritus is a St. Paul-based crisis communication management consultant who guides executives through crisis situations, directs the organization’s response, and coaches organizational leadership. Some of the contrast formats contained in this article were created by Mary Ann N. Cotton, APR, in preparation for Mr. Lukaszewski’s testimony as an expert witness. The Lukaszewski Group’s website, [www.e911.com](http://www.e911.com), is one of the most substantial sources of critical public relations advice on the Internet.*

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1. Adapted from a news story in *The Westchester County Journal News*, Sunday, October 25, 1998, “Hamburger meal nearly kills mom: E. coli bacteria in meat caused liver failure in Croton woman.”