

# Crisis Management's Top 10

Something is going to happen. You just don't know what or when. No county is exempt from unanticipated crises and emergencies. Some will require activation of the county Emergency Operations Center, and there is a precise protocol for roles, responsibilities and processes for EOC operations. Others will rest with the Board of Supervisors and executives to manage. In either case, the community and employees will look to their elected and appointed officials to exercise leadership.

Before the crisis occurs is the time for the Board and senior executives to discuss roles and responsibilities, and how they will work together when the unexpected occurs. The following ten strategies are offered as places to start that conversation, and ideas to keep in mind when the unexpected occurs.

## **1. Act in a way that would make your mother proud.**

People watch your feet and follow your lead – both employees and the community. Every action you take, every word you say in a crises situation is watched; particularly elected and appointed officials. Remember that in every opportunity. Be deliberate in words and action. Consider how they will be interpreted. Act in a way that builds trust, is honest and forthright, and establishes confidence that the county is managing the crises.

## **2. NEVER lie.**

We live in a world where the truth can be uncovered quickly. Being caught lying, exaggerating or being deliberately obtuse about a situation or the county's actions can devastate the county and your Board. Attempted cover-ups can turn a reporter into a folk hero. The payoff for uncovering public agency wrongdoing or mismanagement are huge.

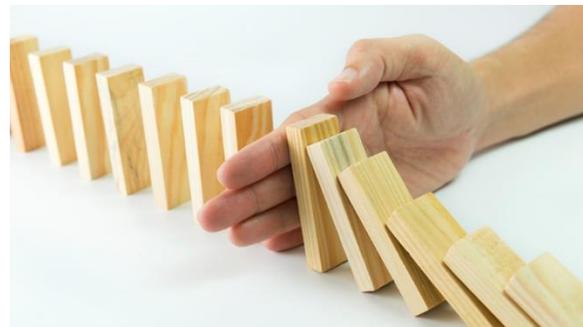
## **3. Tell the truth and tell it quickly.**

Generally, organizations have less than a day to tell their version of the truth. After that, the media and other external stakeholders will have tapped into secondary and tertiary experts who will have their own views on what has happened.

## **4. Make crisis preparation an ongoing process.**

In crisis management, one size does not fit all, and once is not enough. The most effective crisis preparations are those tailored by senior executives and elected officials to fit the needs and vulnerabilities of their county, community,

and stakeholders. Some organizations are tempted to delegate crisis management to a single staff person or office, or to consider the emergency management plan as the ultimate evidence of preparedness. Both are insufficient. Crisis management is an ongoing process that requires careful and constant modification by senior executives as technologies, environments and stakeholders shift. Once preparations are in order, the best-prepared organizations revisit their strategies and consider new contingencies regularly.



## **5. Remember your employees.**

After the smoke has cleared, employees in some organizations lament that they were not able to find out what was going on in their own county while the crisis was occurring. You do not want your employees to have to rely on Twitter or the media as their source of information about their own county. It is demeaning and dangerous to discount those who will be key to your organization's survival. If the crisis has affected the employees of the organization, the board and executives must be prepared to consider and take actions to

address the grieving process for employees and to heal the organization.

#### **6. Designate one spokesperson and surround that individual with experts, as needed.**

The easiest way to deliver a consistent message during a crisis is to have one elected official or senior executive as spokesperson. To this end, all senior executives should go through crisis communication training. The lessons are invaluable and relatively easy to learn. When a crisis hits, the spokesperson should be surrounded by experts who can elaborate on answers to technical questions. Elected officials should prepare for how they will respond to media questions outside of news conferences.



#### **7. Support messengers of bad news.**

Welcome and pursue the reporting of potential problems. When a crisis is looming, your most valuable resource are the people who inform you about the threatening situation quickly. Reducing internal hierarchical barriers to communication and improving communication with external stakeholders enhances the likelihood the county will hear about the situation early, when responses are easier and far less costly in terms of credibility and resources.

#### **8. Build positive relationships in advance.**

The value of maintaining productive relationships with other local, state and federal agencies is even more pronounced in an unfolding crises. Certainly mutual aid in public safety is a given in any crises. But often the management and recovery from a crisis requires the help and support of a multitude of other public agencies. Some officials assume that others will come to their aid when a crisis occurs. This assumption may be ill founded, particularly if there is ill-will among agency policy makers. County Boards and executives can improve the probability for this, however,

by taking time to build and maintain effective relationships with stakeholders well before any crisis situation. Doing so allows you to have a clearer sense of which individuals and agencies you might count on, as well as the ways and extent to which key stakeholders can and will be of assistance. Also, how you may be of assistance should your county be called upon to assist another public agency. During a crisis and recovery avoid (un)intentionally alienating other public agencies (local, state or federal) who may be important allies. It may feel politically satisfying in the moment, but is likely to have much longer negative impact on your county.

#### **9. Make time to learn after the crisis has passed.**

When the threshold of the crisis has passed and business is returning to normal, there is a tendency to want to move on, to get past the trauma that has occurred, to get back to the typical rhythm of county business and leave the crisis behind. But, when you do this, you miss extraordinary opportunities for organizational learning. The details that will enable the county to do better next time are best captured when they are fresh, whether through a debrief with the elected and appointed officials involved or through individual discussions with internal and external stakeholders who took part in the crisis response. The time invested in examining what happened, and making adjustments to plans and practices – particularly at the board and executive level – can pay off when the next crisis occurs.

#### **10. During and after crises, have patience with others ... and with yourself.**

Make time to pause, refresh and reflect. Trying to think clearly under extraordinary conditions takes a toll on the brain, the heart and the body. It is important to attend to all three during and after a crisis. Step away from the crises for a few moments. Allow time for the adrenaline to subside and your full resources to be restored.