

MEDIA RELATIONS in Times of CRISES

All schools have problems.

They have a crises when the media decides to cover them.

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What turns a problem into a crisis news story?

- Drama: emotion; danger; scandal; mystery; violence.
- Victims and perpetrators.
- Visuals - what we see; what we can't see; what the media chooses to print/show.

Often, reporters from radio, television and newspapers will rush to your school while you or your staff are in the midst of a problem / crisis. Occasionally, they may even arrive before 911 emergency personnel. Love them or hate them, reporters have a job to do. They are also operating on deadline. They need fast access to: facts (the 5 W's), quotes and often pictures.

Consider this: if you refuse to talk to reporters, who will they go to next for a quote or explanation of what happened - a distraught parent, disgruntled staff member, hysterical student? Will any of these individuals provide quotes or factual information that portray your school in the best possible light? Do they share your interests and concerns?

In times of crisis, managers require:

- time to react, plan, coordinate;
- all available information,
- control.

At the same time the media has needs that may conflict with your priorities. The media requires:

- immediate access / response;
- as much information as they can have at or before deadline;
- flexibility to deal with a changing story or move to a hotter story.

Plan ahead for the media. Consider how you will do your job, meet your needs in a crisis, and still manage to meet the needs of the media. At all times:

- deliver **YOUR** message, don't just answer questions;
- anticipate and prepare for questions;
- listen actively to questions, repeat them
- ask the reporter to define terms used;
- if asked multiple questions, divide them into separate answers;
- if you don't know, say so;
- don't speculate or be evasive;
- explain what you're doing to find out;
- remember to be positive, specific, correct, cool.

In a crisis, be prepared to answer variations of three core questions from the media:

- What happened?
- How did it happen? (Translation: "*Who's to blame?*")
- What are you doing to make sure it won't happen again?

How to get your message out and portray your school in the *best possible* light:

- keep your statements brief and constantly repeat these three major points to demonstrate:

Empathy - "As professionals, we are concerned and troubled by this event,

Plan - and are responding according to an established plan,

Response - to provide immediate services to students and staff."

- remember that the question isn't important - the answer is!!!
- Take responsibility for making sure your listener understands your message!
- honesty is the best policy. If you made a mistake, admit it up front. Your current and future credibility depends on your openness.
- know what you want to say before you meet the reporter. PLAN ahead

- be sure of your facts. If you're not sure, tell reporters that you will find out and phone them back. Follow through!
- introduce yourself by name and position, note the name of the reporter
- make your key points in the first few moments of the interview
- keep repeating your key points in different words
- do not get drawn into an argument or debate with the reporter
- give only the brief facts as you know them
- think and speak in 20 second clips (sound bites)
- think of “visuals” for TV and print reporters to use in their story if you are rushed for time, tell the reporter this immediately
- explain who will be the designated media spokesperson, when & where she/he will be available and how to get in touch with him/ her
- if you're stumped or confused by a question, ask reporters to repeat it, or ask them to come back to it later in the interview
- ask what details the reporter already has. Their information may not be accurate, but could be very important to your statements and how the story is reported to the public
- stay calm and show that you care.

How to portray you and your school in the worst possible light:

- lie, obstruct and confuse
- refuse to talk to the media when they arrive or phone
- put your hand in front of the camera and order the crew off of the school grounds, all the while saying "No comment" in a loud and forceful voice
- speculate, make assumptions and relay rumors
- make blaming statements against somebody else
- tell reporters that you will call them back, then don't
- give long, complex and detailed answers
- answer questions by bluff & bluster when you don't know the answer
- demand that a story be "*killed*"
- be sarcastic.

Remember, there is NO such thing as "speaking off the record".

If you refuse to talk to the media, or say "no comment" they will talk to a student, parent or bystander. That person may not have the best interests of your school at heart. The message heard and reported by the media may do damage to your school that will take years of hard work to undo. Consider this, would you rather have your concerned voice of reason talking to the media, or a hysterical bystander

Use of cellular phones & portable radios during a crisis: The media has the technical ability to monitor and listen to both cellular phone calls and portable radios (walkie-talkies). If you intend to have a private/confidential conversation with somebody at any time, have it in-person, or on a secure land line telephone.

When speaking to the media, consider these "10 Commandments":

1. If you don't want it printed: Don't say it
2. Say it in 30 seconds or less and never use: "*No Comment*"
3. Never wear sunglasses during an interview
4. Don't be misled by "Off the record"
5. Always get your story out first (truth never catches up to a lie)
6. Release bad news after 6 pm on Friday
7. Don't screw up a slow news day
8. Don't assume the interview is over until the crew drives away
9. Don't fight with people who have ink by the tank and video tape by the mile
10. Never voluntarily submit to an interview with 60 minutes or 20/20