

MEMBERS ONLY

EDUCATION

PUBLICATIONS

CW

Archives

Media Kit

Print Submission

CW Bulletin

Books

RESEARCH

ACCREDITATION

AWARDS

JOBS

COMMUNITIES

CHAPTERS

ABOUT IABC

publications

CW Bulletin

CW Bulletin is the e-newsletter supplement to *CW* magazine. Sent each month to all members, every issue of *CW Bulletin* presents articles, case studies and additional resources on timely topics in communication.



 Printer-friendly  Feedback  Logout

From "What, Me Worry?" to "Of Course, I Lead!": Taking the lead in crisis planning

by Liz Guthridge

If your crisis communication mantra is "What, Me Worry?" you are not alone. In fact, a third of IABC members who took the IABC Research Foundation crisis communication survey last December said they had no formal crisis communication plan in place prior to last year's many natural disasters and organizational crises.

Many of those who don't want to worry about potential crises will also acknowledge their lack of interest in disaster planning face-to-face, not just through anonymous surveys. For example, Charles Pizzo and Gerard Braud, two communication consultants who experienced the trauma of Hurricane Katrina firsthand, say they receive a lot of resistance from communicators when they tell their Katrina stories and encourage people to plan for disasters. Those of us who have had personal experiences with disasters sometimes feel like freaks in a touring carnival show. Our encounters are so out there that it seems many in the audience can't relate. So they continue to live in denial.

There are plenty of great excuses for not preparing: nothing bad has ever happened to you; you lack time, budget and management's support; planning is somebody else's job; you enjoy living in a state of denial; you're lucky....

But are you? Just look at the IABC survey data. Almost seven out of 10 communicators with crisis communication plans said they used their plans last year. (The survey showed that 69 percent of those organizations with plans

[Discuss this article](#)

Related Resources

- [When Warnings Beco](#)
How do you sound the al-
something that may or m
- [The Five Stages of Cris
Management:](#)
The events of Hurricane I
how people's reaction to
often follows a pattern.
- [Life-Saving Communic](#)
If a pandemic strikes, ad
variety of experts would
society running.

implemented their plans in response to events affecting their organizations last year, as described in the March–April 2006 issue of *Communication World*.)

The ROI argument

Still not convinced that you need to prepare? How about considering disaster and crisis planning in terms of ROI?

Let's say you and some colleagues get together and spend 200 hours discussing and testing current conditions or potential vulnerabilities. You then figure out how to address any problem areas. If each person's time were worth US\$80 an hour, you'd be spending US\$16,000 in time in soft dollars.

How does US\$16,000 stack up against what you could lose if your phones went down, if your computers all crashed simultaneously, if you had to recall a product because of tampering, if your entire manufacturing facility was destroyed by a major hurricane? The expense of planning is nothing compared to the amount you could forfeit, and the hit you'd take to your corporate reputation, if you weren't prepared.

Hunting and testing vulnerabilities

So why go hunting for vulnerabilities? Well, that's what effective leaders do.

Ian Mitroff, considered by many to be the father of modern crisis management, advises leaders to "think like a sociopath, but act like a saint" (*Why Some Companies Emerge Stronger and Better From a Crisis, 7 Essential Lessons for Surviving a Disaster*, 2005). His point is to try to simulate the paranoia that terrorists, for example, might exhibit to help build sound crisis plans. Thinking like a controlled paranoid is a superb way to protect employees, the organization and the organization's reputation, which means you'll be acting like a saint.

Andrew S. Grove, the former CEO of Intel and the author of *Only the Paranoid Survive: How to Exploit the Crisis Points That Challenge Every Company*, says that effective leaders regularly make strategic decisions and manage rapid change. This involves identifying problems that are central to the business strategy, making decisions quickly, determining when and how to change direction, ensuring resources are available for change efforts, and measuring the effectiveness of the change.

As a communication leader, you need to focus on issues and potential problems that are linked to your organization's strategy and its execution. If you take some time and examine your key practices, you may discover vulnerabilities that you can easily fix, which will not only improve your day-to-day business operations—they'll get you in better shape for a disaster. But even if a disaster doesn't happen on your watch, you will have a stronger, more nimble communication function.

For example, you may discover that your company spokespeople need more media training. Or, your media contact lists may not be as complete as they should be. You may realize that your just-in-time processes for ordering supplies and inventories don't give you any leeway if there are any hiccups in your supply chain, much less any type of emergency. You may recognize that you operate so leanly that if half your staff gets sick with avian flu, you'd be unable to provide many communication

services.

Below are five general actions you can take that can both produce immediate benefits to your business and put you in a better position to handle a disaster.

1. Get to know the media in your main locations, especially where you have large employee populations. TV and radio media will be more willing to broadcast special 800 numbers for your employees and other alerts in a crisis.

2. Provide media training (especially crisis training) for your company spokespeople. It will make them more effective and better prepared, especially for dealing with the pressure of the situation.

3. Develop or update company fact sheets. This gives you information in a convenient and consistent format that you can use immediately, particularly when time is of the essence.

4. Collect personal e-mail addresses and home and cell phone numbers of all communication staff members and other key individuals. Also set up a group list, such as a Yahoo! Group, and even a shadow e-mail system, with addresses like CEO@yahoo.com, COO@yahoo.com. This gives you the peace of mind of knowing that you can quickly reach people if something happens, even if your company phone, e-mail or IT systems go down, and allows you to respond quickly and take appropriate action.

5. Talk to your internal partners about their business continuity/crisis planning. You can cultivate stronger relationships with your co-workers in HR, business continuity, safety, security, legal and other departments while possibly gaining interesting insights into their plans. This also makes for better working relations at a time of crisis.

Taking the initiative—before something happens

For our new book *Leading People Through Disasters: An Action Guide for Preparing for and Dealing with the Human Side of Crises*, my co-author and I interviewed a number of leaders who had experienced disasters at their workplaces. These disasters, which spanned a 20-year period, included the September 11th attacks, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, bombings, floods, murder, corporate malfeasance, the sudden death of a CEO, and riots. All the stories shared these themes:

1. People hadn't prepared enough—if at all.
2. They underestimated the emotional impact on themselves and others, including executives, employees and families.

3. They got through the disaster, often by taking some clever actions. For example one company used hand-powered chargers (or car chargers) to power up laptops and then finding an analog phone line to connect to the internet to send messages. Another company got trauma counselors quickly on site to screen employees and then provide help, which helped them to deal with the emotional impact of the event right away.

Not too surprisingly, these survivors are now big advocates for disaster preparedness.

***Liz Guthridge** is managing consultant of Connect Consulting Group LLC in the San Francisco Bay Area. She and Kathryn McKee are also authors of the new book, Leading People Through Disasters: An Action Guide for Preparing for and Dealing with the Human Side of Crises.*

© 2006 International Association of Business Communicators.
One Hallidie Plaza, Suite 600 San Francisco, CA 94102 USA
+1 415.544.4700

[Terms of Service](#)