
Crisis Management Primer

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PREFACE

Environment Canada managers are becoming more aware that crises can affect any part of their area of responsibility. While the word "crisis" conjures up thoughts of natural and human-made disasters, of lives lost and property damaged, more often than not most public service managers will have to deal with crises that relate more closely to their everyday area of responsibility, e.g., the delivery of programs, the application of regulations, the interpretation of policy.

It is this latter broad sense of crisis management that is addressed in this primer. By presenting the observations and lessons learned by managers who have found themselves unexpectedly in the position of a crisis manager, it is hoped that managers in Environment Canada will be better able to support government in its management of major issues.

In making a distinction between crises and natural and human-made disasters and emergencies, recognition must be given to the vital role of the Privy Council Office. The mandate of the Privy Council Office in this area is primarily to ensure that federal emergency and crisis management is conducted in an organized manner on behalf of the Government as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the phrase "crisis management" appears to be a contradiction in terms. After all, a crisis is a crisis in large part because it emerges as if from nowhere and challenges our sense of what is normal and well-managed. A crisis is also frequently characterized by confusion or even panic, and occasionally induces rational individuals to throw up their hands and run around in circles.

Can one actually manage a crisis?

The short answer is yes, provided one accepts three fundamental precepts:

1. Crises are inevitable;
2. like any other management challenge, crises should be planned for, at least in the sense that certain management procedures can be agreed upon in advance and implemented once a crisis hits; and
3. crisis management is an integral part of every manager's responsibility. Any department, or any branch in a department, may find itself in a crisis management role.

This primer is based on these precepts. It is composed of a collection of observations and lessons learned by public and private sector managers who have worked their way through a diverse range of crises. The reader is offered a synthesis of these experiences. What is striking is that so much of what is required to successfully manage a crisis is plain common sense.

OBSERVATIONS

1. Crises are inevitable. The question is not whether Environment Canada will find itself embroiled in a crisis, but how soon and how big?
2. There are different types of crises. The Oxford dictionary defines a crisis as "a moment of danger or suspense in politics, commerce, etc."
3. A crisis is a crisis when the media, Parliament and/or credible or powerful interest groups identify it as a crisis. A crisis need not pose a serious threat to human life, but it must somehow challenge the public's sense of appropriateness, tradition, values, safety, security or the integrity of the government.
4. A crisis is exacerbated if there appears, even briefly, to be confusion or nobody in control.
5. From a communications standpoint, the media develop a symbiotic relationship with interest groups.
6. Most electronic-media-focussed crises are short-lived.
7. During a crisis, the logical concept of risk versus benefit is suspended. If the issue of risk is to be discussed, only zero-risk explanations are acceptable to the public and the media.
8. Every crisis is different, but all share to some extent the following characteristics:
 - Surprise;

- insufficient information when you need it most;
 - events outpace response by the organization (real or perceived);
 - escalating flow of events;
 - loss of control (real or perceived);
 - important interests at stake;
 - intense scrutiny from the outside;
 - development of a siege mentality;
 - panic;
 - disruption of regular decision-making processes; and
 - affected managers focus on short-term planning/decision/action.
9. Although every crisis is different, the media and interest groups react with predictable sameness. Three key questions invariably provide the focus for their attention:
- Who is to blame (when will the party "at fault" be fired)?;
 - when did the organization discover the problem, what did it do before it became a public crisis, and what is it doing now that it is a crisis (the who knew what, when, debate)?; and
 - how can the interests at stake be protected and/or compensated?

10. Effective crisis management depends, to a large degree, on effective communications -- within the organization and with external interest groups.

How a crisis is handled in the opening hours can determine if it lasts for a week and is then over, or if it does damage which lasts for years.

11. During a crisis, particularly in the early stages, there tends to be a natural resistance within an organization embroiled in a crisis to be forthcoming with information. This may exacerbate the perception that events are outpacing the response.

The usual arguments for being silent during this critical stage must be resisted. These include:

- We need to assemble more facts;
- we shouldn't be panicked into action;
- we haven't got the right spokesperson;
- there are legal implications we must consider;
- we must be careful of our corporate image;
- we must safeguard powerful interests or important institutions/industries;

- we don't know the solution to the problem;
- we want to be careful we don't reveal competitive information.

These are all valid considerations, but not with respect to first communications with the public.

12. The reasons for communicating are far more compelling and avoid problems implied by each of the reasons for not doing so. They include:

- Address concerns of the affected public;
- initiate contact with or respond to the media;
- control escalation factor -- avoid confusion;
- ensure that you are seen to be taking action; and
- provide valid and timely guidance on what affected persons should do.

LESSONS LEARNED

A variety of practices have been employed in successful crisis management. These practices have been tested in crises by many organizations and have been proven to work.

Crises can be managed. In fact, many organizations have not only survived crises but have enhanced their public and professional images in the process. As for any major management challenge, there must

be a plan and there must be a working team operating within clearly understood guidelines prescribed in the plan. In short, a crisis is a time for exceptional management, not panic or a suspension of good management practices. Managers must be prepared to participate, to focus on the problem at hand, and to know what is expected of them.

As a prerequisite to managing successfully during a crisis, an organization or a government must accept that crises are inevitable and must be prepared for the worst. This does not mean being paranoid. What it means is that we should be tracking potential crisis issues even though there may be no indication whatsoever of a possible crisis.

Crisis management should be viewed as one element in a broader management continuum that comprises pre-crisis management (normal issue management, in other words), crisis management, and post-crisis management (return-to-normal management).

1. Have a clear set of crisis management procedures
 - a) A crisis management plan that sets out:
 - How decisions are made and by whom, including procedures for the organization's crisis management team;
 - a triggering procedure;
 - a fan-out and callback system for rapid first-step communications; and

- a crisis communications plan that includes basic messages, such as the organization's primary concern for health and safety.
 - b) A capacity for ongoing monitoring of emerging issues and public environment analysis. An extension of this is to plan in advance for certain kinds of predictable crises by building into the program or policy development a response to potential tough questions, leaks, etc. Monitoring can also assist in the development of responses to incorrect information put forth by the media and special interest groups.
 - c) A procedure for testing the plan as frequently as possible. It is particularly important to practise multi-department strategies to be sure that people and equipment will work together.
 - d) Provision for training major players/spokespersons.
2. Be prepared for the worst

Be prepared to participate in your organization's crisis management team. The establishment of a crisis management team does not supplant the need for pre-crisis and post-crisis management activity. On the contrary, such activities should be further developed. Issue identification and tracking, with a functioning early-warning system to pick up new and emerging issues at the departmental level, is essential

if an organization is to manage crises successfully.

During a crisis, a designated spokesperson needs to be chosen to speak for the organization.

While it is essential to have a single spokesperson throughout a crisis, there may also have to be a number of subordinate spokespersons who can provide information in the regions, on information hotlines, etc.; or who, because of technical expertise, can assist the lead spokesperson in dealing with the media. No matter how many subordinate spokespersons, the information they give out must be consistent with that of the lead spokesperson. Part of the crisis management team's responsibility would be to develop messages; proposed Question and Answer packages; and media lines for distribution to, and for use by, sub-spokespersons. All spokespersons must sing from the same hymn book.

The level or rank of the spokesperson is important, as it signals the degree of the crisis. If you go too high, you run the risk of unduly alarming the public and you lose an opportunity for a fall-back position. Above all, the spokesperson must be credible and, preferably, fluently bilingual.

3. Take the initiative, make news

Do not be afraid to be forthright with good news or bad. Do not hesitate to admit that you do not have all the answers or that you do

not have the instant "solution" that the media customarily demand. This is the key to establishing your integrity and the fact that you are in control.

Designate a spokesperson (and alternates) and stick with the spokesperson throughout the crisis. In the early hours of a crisis, the spokesperson's message is generally the same -- an expression of genuine concern, not explanation, not blame and never specifics such as compensation -- just concern.

Tell the truth. Emphasize that you are monitoring the situation and are actively seeking a solution.

Inform the media that you will talk to them regularly and do so, but at your time and place. To whatever extent possible, control television visuals by offering your own (interview clips, etc.).

Do not on any account delay action, in the hope that the crisis will blow over.

4. Establish a checklist of contacts

When a crisis hits it is essential that key personnel be notified as quickly as possible. Many organizations report that they have benefited by designating a crisis management team of key officials. Their names, telephone numbers, and where they could be reached 24 hours a day were circulated throughout the organization. All personnel, particularly regional personnel, knew whom to call the instant a crisis was identified.

5. Do not panic

Evaluate the nature of the crisis. Why is it a crisis? Who says it is a crisis (the media, special interest groups)? When was it first identified as a crisis?

Examine the information you are receiving. If it is coming primarily from the media, serious consideration should be given to obtaining information from other sources.

Ascertain key target audiences and focus communications primarily on these audiences.

Be comfortable with having no instant, ultimate solution to the crisis. Avoid knee-jerk reactions to perceived threats.

6. Take action to prevent escalation of the crisis

Never invent a scapegoat. If there is obvious blame to be attached to a person or policy, take appropriate action without delay. Such action should be taken only if it is a genuine solution; firing somebody or retreating on policy as a quick-and-dirty attempt to abort the crisis will achieve nothing and may create more problems than it will solve.

7. Assess the situation from more than one perspective

It is all too easy for senior officials to believe the situation is worse than it really is. When a crisis manager sees only negative editorials or television reports,

the dimension of the problem tends to balloon. Research is the means whereby the manager's mind is refocussed as to the exact size and level of awareness of the problem. In other words, bad press does not necessarily mean public attitudes have significantly altered.

Virtually every successful crisis management program has contained a research component. Managers should not be speculating on what the public may be thinking -- they should know.

8. Identify and inform potential supporters

Enlist the support of those who share your viewpoint. Partisan supporters are affected less by adverse media (generally speaking) than the uncommitted. Informed supporters can have significant impact on the public.

Supporters can be a first line of subtle response by initiating alternative viewpoints (through letters to the editor, for example), which they would be less likely to do if they lacked information.

9. Deal with only the crisis during the crisis

A crisis is not the time to defend policies on the basis of a superior record or outstanding performance in the past. Such achievements should be communicated as a matter of course in non-crisis periods; a good record should be there to fall back on at all times. Third-party spokespersons

talking about the good track record of an organization can however be helpful, even during a crisis.

10. Reintegrate the crisis into the normal flow of business

When a crisis begins to wane and the organization is once again seen to be in control, the crisis issue should be visibly pulled back. For the air of crisis to be dispelled, the issue must lose its special crisis status and be integrated into the organization's day-to-day operations.

11. Conduct a post-mortem

Once the crisis is over and operations are returning to normal, it is important from both a communications and an operational point of view to have a post-mortem. This is where all the participants sit down and examine how the crisis management plan worked. Was there a plan? If not, develop one. Review who did what; when things happened; why things happened. What was learned?

Follow up right after; make modifications so you are better prepared for the next crisis (there is always a next crisis).

SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED

Crises are inevitable. The question is not whether Environment Canada will find itself embroiled in a crisis, but how soon and how big?

1. Develop a crisis management plan

2. Be prepared for the worst

Track potential crisis issues.

Develop a capacity for ongoing monitoring of emerging issues.

Test the crisis management plan.

Train your key players/spokespersons.

3. Take the initiative

Establish your integrity.

Make news.

Take control.

Designate a spokesperson and alternates and stick with the spokespersons throughout the crisis.

Inform the media.

Do not delay action.

4. Establish a checklist of contacts

5. Do not panic

Who says this is a crisis?

Don't believe everything you hear, see or read in the media.

Ascertain key target audiences and focus communications primarily on these audiences.

Be comfortable with having no instant, ultimate solution to the crisis. Avoid knee-jerk reactions to perceived threats.

6. Take action to prevent escalation of the crisis

Never invent a scapegoat, but if there is obvious blame to be attached to a person or a policy, take appropriate action without delay.

7. Assess the situation from more than one perspective

Negative editorials or television reports may cause senior officials to believe the situation is worse than it really is.

8. Identify and inform potential supporters

Informed, aware supporters can have more impact on the public than is usually realized.

9. Deal with only the crisis during the crisis

A crisis is not the time to defend policies based on a superior record or outstanding performance in the past.

10. Reintegrate the crisis into the normal flow of business

When a crisis begins to wane, reintegrate the issue into the organization's day-to-day operations.

11. Conduct a post-mortem

Follow up right after; make modifications so you are better prepared next time.

If the crisis escalates, be prepared to continue crisis management activities in support of a central crisis management team.

CONCLUSIONS

During a crisis, handle only the crisis.

There are two essential elements to handling a crisis:

- On the policy, substantive or operational side, you can take action to fix the problem; and
- On the communications side, you can keep the public, media and interest groups informed of what you are doing and why.

A large part of crisis management is the communications element. Well-managed communications can greatly assist your effective response to a crisis.

Because many crises confronting government involve more than one department, inter-departmental cooperation and coordination is required. A crisis is no time to start discussing procedures or dividing up responsibilities.

Crisis management procedures are essential. Managers must have a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, going into and during a crisis. Training and exercises facilitate a high level of preparedness.

From a communications point of view, it is necessary to have a single message; to have clear, accurate, reliable information; and the message should be delivered by a designated spokesperson supported by sub-spokespersons drawing from the same information base.

