

Crisis or Hoax? Responding to Hoaxes

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Topic: Crisis Management, Crisis Communications

One person's practical joke may be viewed by others as lack of vision, poor judgment or malicious intent. How do your staff members know the difference? If you're making the assumption that everyone innately knows, you may find you're doing more than "Making an a__ of you and me," as the saying goes. At this time in history, you might find a HAZMAT team — or FBI agents — at your door. Think we're exaggerating? Here are a few examples perpetrated by people who "should have known better."

Crying Wolf in the 21st Century

- As a joke, a Maryland state worker sprinkled white powder around the office of a co-worker. He faces federal charges.
- A Virginia postal worker, who thought that her supervisors weren't taking the anthrax threat seriously enough, made her point by sprinkling baby powder on open mail. She faces federal charges.
- A Pennsylvania firefighter told his buddies at the firehouse that white powder spilled out of a letter he'd opened at home; 12 hours later he 'fessed up that there wasn't ever any white powder. Meanwhile, he stood silently by while 14 firefighters scrubbed themselves and the station house, and a HazMat team, which came from a town two-hours away, checked his house and decontaminated his kids and him.
- A Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection employee reported finding a powdery substance near his workstation. As a result, 800 employees were out of work for two days (estimated cost: \$1.5 million) and 12 employees underwent decontamination procedures (estimated cost: \$40,000). If convicted he faces up to five years in prison and \$3 million in fines.
- Two students at a Kentucky University mailed a letter containing powdered sugar and written in Arabic-looking script to a friend. When the sugar leaked out at the post office, mail operations were temporarily halted. They face a charge of mailing a threatening communication, a felony punishable by up to five years in prison.

May a Joke be "Just a Joke"?

False alarms, deliberate hoaxes, pranks and practical jokes are halting operations, closing offices and costing millions of dollars. Flour, confectioner's sugar, granulated sugar, talcum powder, cornstarch, ground candies and table salt have been passed off as anthrax by people wishing to play a joke on co-workers, to teach a lesson, to gain attention and to cause havoc. Prior to anthrax being found in Sen. Tom Daschle's office, there were false fire alarms, false bomb scares and false threats of violence, which have disrupted public entities, nonprofit organizations and small businesses. When a member of the general public perpetrates these threats, the disruption is bad enough. When a member of your staff does the deed, it's worse. Are you prepared to respond?

Some Things to Consider

Do you have a zero tolerance policy for hoaxes, in addition to guns, alcohol and drugs on site? Or do you handle each case as it arises, factoring in the staff member's length of service, job skills, personality, and previous behavior to determine the consequences from reprimand to dismissal? Does the person's "intent" (from practical joke to intention to harm) weigh in your decision? What risks do you face for inequitable handling of

staff members' "practical jokes"? Have you communicated your policy to staff members (including volunteers) in terms that make clear to them what act(s) and behavior(s) you consider unacceptable? Or are you concerned that listing certain behaviors will preclude other behavior(s) from falling under the policies? Do your personnel policies reflect your stance and the consequences? If not, do you have a leg to stand on in the event your entity, organization or company is the recipient of a hoax?

- Create and publish a Code of Conduct for staff members (paid and volunteer).
- Tie policy into state and local laws. For example, "§ as defined in Chapter 34 of Title 54.1 and § 18.2-247 of the Code of Virginia."
- List specific acts or behaviors, and consider adding the phrase "Other unlawful acts including being an accessory to any of these or other unlawful acts."
- Identify the range of consequences that can occur if policy or code is violated. For example: Violation of this policy will lead to disciplinary action, possible dismissal and criminal prosecution, as appropriate.
- Spell out how you will respond. For example, "After investigation, [entity's, organization's or company's name] will respond appropriately. This response may include, but is not limited to, suspension and/or termination of any business relationship, reassignment of job duties, suspension or termination or employment, and/or the pursuit of criminal prosecution of the person or persons involved."

Sample Policies

Although the following are school policies, they may help you visualize how to word expanded or newly created policies for your company, entity or nonprofit organization.

The [Cornell University Web site](#) cites the expectations and consequences for responsible computer use.

Bomb threats and hoaxes

It is illegal to send a message via e-mail that threatens other persons or property. While this might seem obvious, every year a number of individuals send what they believe are "hoax messages." Such messages may be investigated by federal authorities with the result that the senders end up with their names in the files of the FBI and/or CIA. This is not an exaggeration!

It also violates Cornell's policies and the Campus Code of Conduct to send certain kinds of hoax messages (for example, April Fool's jokes that appear to be from a professor or some other university official). Such hoaxes constitute forgery and will be referred for appropriate disciplinary action.

Wise County Public Schools specifically addresses bomb threats in its policies.

Bomb Threats

Students shall not engage in any illegal conduct involving firebombs, explosive or incendiary materials or devices or hoax explosive devices or chemical bombs as defined in the Code of Virginia. Moreover, students shall not make any threats or false threats to bomb school personnel or property.

In addition to these specific standards, students shall not engage in any conduct which materially and substantially disrupts the ongoing educational process or which is otherwise a violation of federal, state or local law.

WCPS also spells out 16 types of corrective actions, from counseling to notification of legal authorities, available to the school administration for violation of the Student Code of Conduct, and cautions that each offense shall be considered fully in determining reasonable corrective actions.

[Colonial Heights School District](#) phrases their hoax and consequences policy as follows:

Unlawful acts which will lead to policy notification and may lead to suspension from classes, exclusion from

activities or expulsion include but are not limited to:

- Bomb threats, including false threats, against school personnel or property
- Any illegal conduct involving firebombs, explosive or incendiary devices or materials, hoax explosive devices or chemical bombs.
- Other unlawful acts including being an accessory to any of these or other unlawful acts.

A letter published in the Foothills Newsletter and dated October 26, 2001, from the principal of Foothills Elementary School (Lakewood, Colo.) to parents and guardians enlisted their help in providing a safe environment free of hoaxes. It said in part:

We are asking all parents and responsible students to help eliminate the possibility of disruptions at school due to hoax incidents. Students and staff must feel safe at school. It also is imperative that we protect the educational environment.

Our pledge to you is that we will take threats of any kind to our school seriously, and we will involve law enforcement agencies in the investigation. In all cases, we will ask law enforcement officials to help us evaluate the validity of the threat. We will also ask law enforcement and the courts to prosecute anyone responsible for making a threat or perpetrating a hoax, adult or student, to the fullest extent possible under the law.

We ask your support in the following ways:

- Talk frequently with your children about what they are hearing and seeing on the news, at school or in the neighborhood.
- Discuss with them the seriousness of playing a prank, teasing or spreading rumors.
- Encourage them to report any suspicious activity to a trusted adult at school or to you.

Overall Risk Management Considerations

As you review your policies, make certain that you have the following areas covered to investigate and handle the hoax.

- A complaint procedure.
- Emergency procedures in event of a serious threat.
- Designated management personnel and security personnel responsible to investigate complaints and who will be responsible in case of an emergency.
- Reservation of management's right to review employee e-mail, voice mail and computer files.