Teambuilding: Rx for Crisis Survival

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New Book Offers Practical Tips for Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving a Crisis

The following article is excerpted from a new book from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving a Crisis in a Nonprofit*. For more information, click here.*

Forming a Crisis Response Team

Authors of various crisis management texts agree that a small team should be formed to coordinate an organization's response to a crisis. The need to form and train the team *before* a crisis hits is paramount. This will be your action team. They will have internalized the drill and be able to think on their feet. They can remain calm under fire and have a presence. They will lead the troops and enable your nonprofit to survive a crisis.

The composition of an organization's crisis response team will vary based on a wide range of factors, including:

- **The *size of the organization*** — The number of paid and volunteer staff working for the organization. For example, in an organization with more than 50 staff, the crisis response team may include a handful of key department heads (include maintenance personnel or other structural advisors) plus the CEO. In an organization with fewer than 10 paid staff, the crisis response team may include board members, staff and outside professional advisors.
- **The *nature of the services provided by the organization*** — Every nonprofit should consider its operations and circumstances before naming the members of the crisis response team. The composition of a crisis response team at an environmental advocacy group will differ from the team that responds to a crisis at a daycare center. In the former, the team may include an experienced lobbyist and an environmental scientist. In the latter, the team may include the organization's retained counsel, an expert on child abuse prevention or playground safety, and parents of enrolled children.
- **The *likely sources/causes of crisis in the organization*** — Before forming the team the nonprofit should identify the most likely causes of a crisis. Is the organization more likely to face a crisis stemming from allegations of client mistreatment or a crisis caused by inadequate financial resources? The ranking of crisis risks will suggest areas of expertise and training that may be required during a crisis and individuals with special talents or expertise may be identified as necessary members of the crisis response team.
- **The *organization's prior experience responding to a crisis*** — One certainty in any crisis situation is that when it's all over, one or more key lessons will have been learned. The type of people whose service

will be required or highly valued may be among the lessons learned. An organization reflecting on how it handled a lawsuit may conclude that the nonprofit's insurance advisor would have been a valuable member of the crisis response team. The survivors of a crisis may acknowledge that emergency procedures or equipment are of little use when they haven't been tested.

Decide Who Will Serve

Given the tremendous diversity in the nonprofit sector, it's difficult, if not impossible, to suggest the ideal composition of a crisis response team. However, it's a worthwhile exercise to consider the following individuals or personality types as potential members of your team:

- **The Top Dog** — Why include the nonprofit's executive director or president in responding to a crisis? There may be several reasons. For example, the executive director can quickly command the respect and attention of key staff and volunteers — he or she is a leader already known to the organization's constituents. In addition, the executive director is already empowered to act on behalf of the organization, thus no time-delaying special action is required to grant the CEO the authority needed during a crisis. Finally, the executive director may be the organization's most effective spokesperson.If the executive director is on the team, it's natural that he or she also serves as the team leader. If this isn't your choice, the executive director should appoint a leader who will be able to make decisions and build consensus. The executive director may have a leader in mind when he or she appoints the committee, perhaps a senior manager with tenure at the nonprofit or someone with past experience providing leadership in a crisis.
- **The Mouthpiece** — Every nonprofit should have a predetermined spokesperson in order to be truly prepared for a crisis. Sometimes the best spokesperson is the executive director or CEO. For example, following the airplane crash in the Florida Everglades, Value Jet CEO Lewis Jordan was a highly visible spokesperson for the company, convening press conferences in the days following the crash. At every opportunity and before each update on the crash investigation, Jordan reaffirmed the company's sadness and sympathy for the victims of the crash and the family members of victims.Other organizations adopt a policy of allowing the CEO to present good news and another spokesperson (a public relations professional or other senior manager) to present bad news. Keep in mind that you will also need a trained backup spokesperson who can fill in if the CEO is otherwise engaged or is the subject of the crisis.
- **The Legal Eagle** — Being able to provide a skillful analysis of potential liability and actions needed to prevent a crisis from turning into a field day for the plaintiff's attorney are lead traits for this member of your team. This master networker is the voice of caution, aware of what he or she doesn't know, who tends a wide network of attorney colleagues who could be tapped if needed. The attorney currently serving on your board may — or may not — be the legal eagle you need for your crisis response team.
- **The Bean Counter** — Every crisis response team should include someone with financial training — the financial whiz whose fingers fly on the keys of an adding machine. This key team member will be able to calculate what different strategies will cost, and keep the team informed about the total bill for crisis response activities.
- **The Juggler** — The juggler on the crisis response team acts as a project manager. This individual should be someone who is intimately familiar with the organization's programs and services, as well as the talents of other team members. Look for someone who can remind, cajole, organize and motivate others to keep moving, keep on time and keep in line. Designating a project manager role for the crisis response team takes some of the pressure off the executive director, who must be principally concerned with managing the organization's communications and relationships with key constituents.
- **The Super** — Every crisis response team should include the person who knows the building inside and out who can help responding professionals such as firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical technicians do their jobs efficiently.

Don't Try to Fit Everyone in Your Pace Car

While it's important to include key personnel on your crisis response team, it's also important to make certain that you exclude some individuals who can keep the organization focused on its mission. Remember that when the crisis response team is off planning, someone has to remain to deliver services. In addition, while it's important to get "buy in" from every level of the organization, groups that are too large tend to become unwieldy and have difficulty achieving consensus.

Another option is to create one team (primary) to develop the background philosophy and then involve additional staff in creating individual plans. The work is spread out and the primary group becomes responsible

for review — more than creation. This approach also helps teach a broader spectrum of staff what goes into a plan and what is generally expected of them during a crisis.

For more information on *Vital Signs*, click here.