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The Crisis Simulation: Testing For The Unthinkable

By Bart J. Mindszenty, APR

About two years ago we were planning another in a series of biannual crisis management/communications simulations for a large organization in the energy sector. As we met with a small planning group, we suggested a complex, highly threatening scenario that would push the executive team and the communications unit to a new level.

After some discussion, our client vetoed our proposed scenario. "That's too drastic; the chances of that happening are so remote, let's not even go there," she said unequivocally.

I wonder what she'd say in a post-Sept. 11 world.

For many years, enlightened organizations in all sectors have been diligently conducting simulations on a regular basis to test their crisis plans and hone the skills of their people to be best prepared for what seemed like logical and probable threats.

Today, we need to rethink how we conduct crisis management/communications simulations because the unthinkable is now thinkable. Terrorism has been with us for a long time, but it's never been as dramatically and drastically executed as on that horrible day in September. And, beyond terrorism, there is the simple fact that many of our systems are more vulnerable because they are aging, and we now use them in a 24/7 world. In addition, acts of violence are seemingly more violent; acts of sabotage are more drastic; and acts of

white-collar crime are more daring.

Given this environment in which there is every likelihood of more extreme crises, we would be wise to reevaluate our approach to crisis management/communications simulations. While we should and must continue with the "traditional" exercises at regular intervals, it's now time to ratchet up the level, scope and intensity of some simulations to address those kinds of situations that are highly unlikely or maybe even seemingly impossible.

I suggest that all of us who have responsibility for — and input into — crisis management/communications plans and simulations should take a long, hard and deep look at not just our traditional vulnerabilities, but those that could come out of left field and blindsides the organization. For example, any public gathering place — a ballpark or theme park or even theaters — should define how it would approach not the just low-level crises of personal assault, lost child, or crowd control issues, but high-level scenarios such as mass murder or mass poisoning.

Those managing natural gas and oil pipelines and refineries all have sophisticated disaster control and recovery plans, but perhaps they all need to spend more time examining the consequences of extreme sabotage or system failures. Resorts and hotels generally have plans to manage highly likely crisis situations, but few, from our experience, know how

to effectively handle a major explosion, fire, or poisoning. In fact, every sector needs to take the time to look both at its precautionary measures, and its reactionary preparedness and capabilities. While most organizations now have at least basic crisis management/communications plans, it's remarkable how many are either too media driven, too simple or too complex, and, worst of all, outdated. When we identify those "unthinkable" possibilities, we should assess our response capabilities, introduce modifications to our existing plans to bolster those capabilities, and then test them.

But there is another unwelcome consideration that has to be addressed in a post-Sept. 11 world. What if something so catastrophic happens that the organization simply can't cope or respond in either a timely or an effective way?

For PR practitioners, this kind of potential mega-crisis — an incident or issue with catastrophic consequences that virtually shuts down the organization's ability to operate — creates a new level of challenge. Protecting the organization's reputation and credibility becomes a hugely more difficult, if not impossible, task.

This is all the more reason for every organization to have a strong, focused and sustained branding and reputation management process so that if the unthinkable happens, there is a significant investment in the bank of public goodwill. Equally

important, organizations should now determine how to define and, if ever needed, communicate as credibly as possible in a mega-crisis situation. This is easy to say, but hard to do, as it requires a new level of candor and openness that for the senior management of many organizations will be hard to accept. This requires a new way of thinking and talking about our worst fears and nightmares, yet we all know that telling the truth is, in the end, the best and only way to earn ongoing stakeholder understanding.

This is not meant to be a Chicken Little view of doom and gloom. Rather, it's a wake-up call for all of us — and especially those organizations that have allowed crisis management/communications plans to lapse — that it's not a question of "if" there will be crisis, but only a matter of "when" and "how big."

And it's the "how big" simulations that will best demonstrate our flaws, and best help us learn what we must do to reduce and more appropriately manage the unthinkable when it happens. ☛



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