

# What do Good Scouts and crisis communications have in common?

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For public relations people, there's no better training ground for practicing crisis communications than the chemical industry. Although chemical companies have earned one of the best safety records of any industry, they still find themselves under intense public scrutiny with almost every accidental spill or leak.

Fortunately, because the chemical industry is hyper-sensitive about safety, accidents that do happen are often minor, and easily controlled. But occasionally, despite the emphasis on prevention, a large mishap occurs: Mississauga; leaks into the St. Clair River; a train derailment in northern Ontario. And that's when the chemical industry's preparedness and commitment to emergency response pays off.

Be prepared. That's the singular rule behind effective crisis communications. How do you get prepared? We believe you need a process in place, and up-front: one that's simple, logical, understood, accepted and practiced by line management.

At C-I-L, we developed a copyrighted crisis communications manual as the backbone of our process. It was put together by a team of PR professionals, including the authors, T. A. G. Watson of Tricil Limited, Joe Will of Trimac Ltd., Bill Koch, Executive Vice-President of David A. Meeker and Associates of Ohio, plus input from various C-I-L engineering, occupational health and safety, and emergency response people.

Here's what we created:

## • What's a crisis?

Because line managers need to have a clear understanding of just how serious their problem is, we identified five key conditions surrounding a crisis:

1. **TRIGGER** - an action that upsets normal operations.
2. **URGENCY** - the event requires immediate action to regain control.
3. **UNCONTROLLED** - the situation is beyond the organization's control for a length of time - from a few hours to several months.

4. **THREATENING** - the event poses negative implications to any or all of the following:

- people: employees, personal, public, the end-users, etc.
- property: company, personal, public, the environment
- company: reputation, ability to carry on business, financial impact, etc.

5. **REQUIRES ACTION** - management must initiate action to resolve the crisis.

## • Why should I worry?

We believe a crisis isn't 'if', but 'when and how big'. Given this inevitability, it's important for line managers to understand that their view of a crisis - a technical problem - may not be the public's view - a serious threat. And it's up to the company spokespeople to try to close this perceptual gap in order to protect the organization's credibility and community trust.

## • What should I do?

Once people understand and accept just why they should take crisis seriously, they'll likely pay more attention to preparation. And since the chances of having expert communications counsel on hand at the outset of a crisis is remote at best, managers will find themselves out front and on the firing line unless they've done their homework.

Our manual sets out in great detail precisely what information plant managers and spokespeople need at their fingertips - fact sheets on the company, any health data related to its products, plus names and numbers of local officials, media, and environmental agencies. We've included detailed checklists and logsheets for the key people involved in managing the crisis, so they can concentrate on the tasks at hand, without worrying about things falling through the cracks.

## • My crisis is happening now! What should I do?

1. Keep those communications lines open. Make sure that the people who need or want to know are kept informed and updated all along the way. There's nothing worse than your presi-

dent finding out about the crisis on the 11:00 news. Don't forget to inform your employees, plus your neighbors, local officials, appropriate government agencies and so on. And provide updates to all major audiences regularly.

2. Show concern. We can't emphasize it enough. Don't get into defensive arguments about who's to blame, or risk/benefit analyses, the size of the accident or speculation as to how it happened. Show concern for people's feelings, even if you think their anxieties are overblown. Later on, through an ongoing educational process, you can try to correct their misconceptions. But not now.

3. Talk with the media. Don't stonewall - it will only backfire. Select and train - beforehand! - one credible spokesperson (and back-up) who handles all media inquiries. Prepare an immediate statement - even if it's only to acknowledge that an accident has happened, and the company is very concerned. We advise not to use a PR person as the spokesperson, unless he or she has solid credibility with the media, or no other qualified spokespeople are available. Keep media updated with frequent briefings.

4. Keep a log of all conversations and decisions related to the crisis. You'll need to refer back to events as they unfold, so don't rely on your memory. A logbook should be kept by the designated communications coordinator, by the senior manager in charge, and by the PR counsel. These are indispensable for post-mortems, case studies, or investigations. Plus, they can be used as a measurement tool on the effectiveness of the communications process.

5. Last but not least, it's not over until the public perceives it's over. A crisis doesn't end when the last firetruck leaves. Investigations, follow-up calls, 'One year after' broadcasts, and rebuilding your organization's corporate credibility extend the lifespan of a crisis over weeks, months, and sometimes even years (remember Nestle and the third world infant formula crisis?). No crisis is easy. No crisis preparation is 100 percent foolproof. But at C-I-L, we've found that our crisis communications manual has helped our managers feel ready and capable of maintaining our company's credibility both at heat of the crisis and over the following months.

*Crisis*