

# Crisis Communications and Planning

All of a sudden, out of nowhere...

You are grading papers at home one evening when your cell phone rings. A reporter from your local newspaper informs you that criminal charges have been filed against one of your members for allegedly having an illegal sexual relationship with an underage student. He asks for a comment.

This is not a mere controversy. This is a crisis because the integrity or reputation of your local is potentially at stake.

## **An inappropriate response:**

You yell an obscenity at the reporter before hanging up and throwing your cell phone across the room.

## **An appropriate response:**

You ask the reporter if you can call back in a few minutes, then you contact your local's Crisis Communication Team to develop a response.

## WHO

Locals and their members are often the first to know about impending or reported crises and are in the best position to provide a rapid response.

### **The Crisis Communication Team**

The team should include key decision-makers in your local who are prepared on short notice to work with the local's president to quickly develop a response to a communications crisis and decide who the spokesperson should be. Generally, the president is the logical spokesperson.

Members of the team should have each other's personal contact information – keep it updated – and be able to reach each other quickly. This is essential when a crisis erupts.

## WHY

Locals and their members may find themselves faced with a crisis that requires an immediate response.

A crisis is often a situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of the association and its members, usually brought on by adverse or negative media attention or other unfavorable publicity. Knowing what to do can be the difference between stability and upheaval. If handled correctly the damage can be minimized.

## HOW

One thing to remember that is crucial in a crisis is to: tell it all, tell it fast, and tell the truth.

### **Responding to Your Members**

The first thing you should do is send a communications out to members. It doesn't have to include a lot of detail. You just have to let them know the association is aware of the crisis and taking care of it. The last thing you want to happen is for your members to find out about the crisis from the media and then provide public comment that often contributes to the problem.

- Update websites, voice mail, phone scripts, newsletters, social network posts, and other communications venues as needed.
- Keep your communications simple. Make them personal, local and reassuring.
- Create fact sheets to guide all of the communications so each communication tool is using the same current information.
- Maintain a master list of frequently asked questions and answers.
- Meet with key stakeholders to identify questions, stop rumors, and provide accurate & timely information.

*[The NEA Health Information Network also has extensive materials and walk-through guidance about communications during events affecting student, staff, and public safety (e.g., natural disasters, medical emergencies, and campus violence): [www.neahin.org/crisisguide](http://www.neahin.org/crisisguide).]*

### **Responding to the Media**

- Reply to the media as quickly as possible. If you try to ignore the situation or the media, the crisis may get worse.

- Tell the truth.
- Don't stonewall. Don't mislead. Don't speculate.
- In cases of alleged criminal behavior, such as the example cited here, say something to the effect that. "We regret that these charges were filed, but (name of member) is entitled to his/her day in court. We will wait for the justice system to work."
- Stick to your prepared statement. Don't answer hypothetical or speculative questions from reporters and, under no circumstances, say anything that remotely suggests that TSTA or your local condones criminal behavior.

*[For detailed guide on interacting with the media, see also Working Effectively with Local Media, p. \_\_]*

Whether addressing your members or communicating externally, always remember to:

- ❖ first acknowledge the difficulty or unpleasantness of the situation or allegation,
- ❖ assure that the association is actively monitoring this matter and plan to help solve the problem, and
- ❖ do not be defensive!

### **Informing TSTA**

Forward your statements to the TSTA Help Center and Public Affairs so that members who call Headquarters will receive the same message and reinforce the same message.

## **WHAT**

Controlling the initial message is essential in setting the desired tone for public and member reactions to crisis.

Work through your Crisis Communications Team to develop the substance and mechanisms for informing your members and others about the crisis.

Does the nature of the crisis require coordination with the district, college, or other entities? If so, work with their respective communication efforts.

Communication with staff, students, parents, the community, and the media is critical before (if possible), during, and sometimes after a crisis. If the event was severe, expect the press to possibly follow-up on anniversaries.

Place a priority on internal communications, then extend to external

communications — especially if there are different details for members than for the public.

### Tips & To-Do's

- Develop a preliminary message and statement: what's happened, and what's the immediate response? E.g., a press release, a memorandum to members, or an FAQ are some examples of documents.
- Choose a designated spokesperson: this may or may not be your association president. It should be someone who has been trained as a spokesperson and has knowledge of the issue.
- Develop a script for phone calls, and for leaders and building reps who will be fielding questions.
- Plan the timing. Is the communication needed right away? When should it go out? Will updates be necessary?
- Make it personal and local: always mention your members' deep commitment to the success of every child and/or the local association's agenda to put students at the center of positive actions.

## WHAT ELSE

Maintaining good rapport with media contacts will set the pace for future crises.

### Recognize good education coverage

If you read a newspaper article or a blog, see a television story or listen to a radio report that appreciates public education and the work of teachers and other school employees, email your thanks to the reporter.

Also consider nominating his/her story for a TSTA School Bell Award. They are presented each year at the statewide House of Delegates meeting. Look for "awards" on [www.tsta.org](http://www.tsta.org) for details.

## PLANNING WORKSHEET

Who generally handles communications for your district/college?

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If an emergency occurred affecting students, staff, or community safety, who would you first contact at the district/college?

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Who would handle communications for your Local during such an emergency?

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Who would establish what to communicate, and when, during a crisis?

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What methods do you have to communicate with members and the public during a crisis?

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