

Healing from the Inside Out:

A Crisis Communicator's Guide to Employee Communications

By Carreen Winters, Executive Vice President

AN MWW GROUP WHITE PAPER



It's late on a Friday afternoon and the call you've been dreading comes in.

Your company is in crisis. Maybe it is an old-school crisis – perhaps a product flaw, warehouse fire or other manufacturing issue – or perhaps it's a newer breed of crisis, such as an accounting error, executive misbehavior or pending litigation. Whatever the problem, a long weekend awaits.

In a crisis, you will be interacting with a wide range of constituents, each with their own pressing needs. You will activate your crisis team and begin implementing your crisis protocol. As you confer with lawyers, respond to investigative journalists and field investor inquiries, your employees will be preparing to leave for the weekend. By Saturday morning, they may be facing questions from their families, from friends, from members of their communities and, in some cases, from their business associates – perhaps even your customers. By Monday morning, only a few business hours after the crisis hit, their opinions will have been formulated and shared. Does your crisis protocol include interaction with your employees, to give them the appropriate context that will help them form an educated opinion? Or are they among the many constituent groups left wondering what this crisis might mean?

The answer to this question will have a fundamental impact on how your company fares during this crisis period and any that follow. Consider these facts:

Your employees are the universal touch point to all of your other stakeholders – customers, suppliers, partners and communities. In this they become de facto spokespeople.

30 million Americans own stock or have options in their employer; odds are, many of your employees are also shareholders. The advent of digital technology – first e-mail, now IM, blogs and chat rooms – has removed nearly all barriers that once stood between an employee and the wider world. His or her opinion, educated or unformed, can now be broadcast to a global audience in a matter of moments.

In the race to inoculate, preserve or repair corporate reputation in the midst of a crisis, the single most important constituency – the employee base – is often overlooked. This despite the fact that employees have a greater impact on reputation than any other constituency. This influence can be direct – they are your shareholders, your brand ambassadors, and your customer relationship managers – or it can be indirect. How your employees respond can serve as a litmus test for those deciding whether this particular crisis is just a short-term hurdle or a capital-C Crisis with long-term ramifications.

Following are three simple guidelines to help you leverage employee support:

- **Activate (Quickly).** You know the old saying about secrets: they only stay secret if one of the people in the know is dead. Nothing undermines your credibility more than having employees hear about inside news from an outside source. Wherever possible, employees should be brought into the fold quickly. Internal communication should happen simultaneous to your external response. And if it is legally permissible to brief your employees first, then do so.

If your crisis plan does not include an employee communications protocol, update it to include this component. Prepare for after-hours issues, and for the prospective inability of your employees to use office-based tools like e-mail.

- **Inform.** Begin by telling them, in a rational and straightforward manner, what has occurred. Most importantly, be sure to tell them specifically what you want them to do, or not do. What to say, and when and how to pass a question to their superiors. Employees want to do the right thing. Too often, mistakes are made with the best intentions. Tell employees how you want them to interact with external constituents, how to field questions, what responses to offer.

In addition, be sure to address procedures to ensure that day-to-day activities are not overlooked. Too often, an entire organization rallies around a crisis and fails to attend to the day-to-day management of the business.

Personal contact should be a priority during this communications period. E-mail and similar technology is certainly faster when disseminating news, but important elements can be lost – such as the tone and presence of the speaker and the ability to field questions. Rely on speed when it is necessary, but follow up with a more interactive approach.

Also, stick to the facts when sharing crisis news with employees. Avoid finger pointing, blame, or emotional reactions. Focus on the solution and the path forward. The tone you set with your employees will be replicated in their interaction with outside constituencies.

- **Eliminate Uncertainty.** It is important to eliminate uncertainty wherever possible. Communicate in a straightforward and common-sense manner. Keep legal-ese to a minimum. Preempt rumors by answering unspoken questions. If the situation is volatile and subject to change, it is fine to say so. Employees will understand the limits of what you can tell them and will appreciate your efforts anyway. Tell your employees what the event means to them - to their department and to the business - but more importantly, tell them what it doesn't mean. The worst-case scenario is the easiest to imagine, but rarely occurs.

While the breadth and scope of what is considered a crisis is massive, most crisis situations tend to have the same defining elements. They tend to happen unexpectedly and at the worst possible time. They can seem more like triage than an effective communications procedure. They can be overwhelming. The best way to manage these competing pressures is to prepare effectively. And the best way to ensure that crises are contained effectively – the best way to keep them from becoming overwhelming – is to include employees at the outset. Aesop put it best, more than 2500 years ago, when he wrote that united we stand, and divided we fall.

For more information or to discuss your internal communications needs please contact:

Carreen Winters, Executive Vice President | cwinters@mww | 201.964.2410