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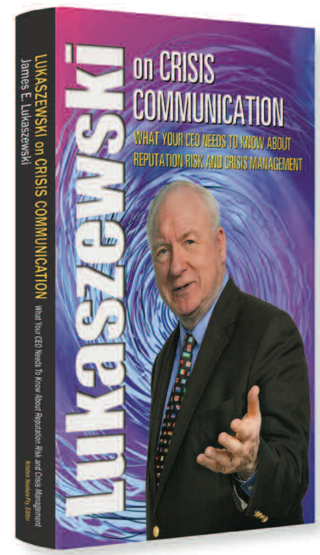
Management

Lukaszewski on Crisis Communication

What Your CEO Needs to Know About Reputation Risk and Crisis Management



by James E. Lukaszewski

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Your CEO's in handcuffs! Things are going downhill, fast! Your whole world is watching to see what you do next. In this industry-defining book on crisis management and leadership recovery, nationally recognized crisis expert and strategist Jim Lukaszewski jump-starts the conversation and taps into four decades of professional expertise to clearly differentiate a crisis from other business interruption events. He introduces a concept rarely dealt with in crisis communication and operational response planning: managing the victim dimension of crisis.

Delivered in his straight-talking style and backed with compelling case studies, *Lukaszewski on Crisis Communication* is your guide to preparing for a crisis and the explosive visibility that comes with it. Lukaszewski's advice will resonate with CEOs, board members, senior executives in HR, risk management and emergency response management as he stresses what happens to those who fail to be ready for crisis. *Lukazewski on Crisis Communication* describes patterns of good business response and gives details on what went wrong and why.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To differentiate between a crisis and a disaster, understand how crises produce victims, and avoid the toxicity of silence.
- To overcome the abusive, intrusive and coercive behavior of bloviators, belly-achers, back-bench bitchers, the media, activists and critics.
- To manage people, including your own employees, with compassion, fairness and honesty — and drive attorneys to settle instead of litigate.

CONTENTS

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: **LUKASZEWSKI ON CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

by James E. Lukaszewski

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For additional information on the author, go to www.summary.com.

It's All About Victims

I prefer to define crisis with focus on victims, a concept rarely dealt with in crisis communication and operational response planning. Victims and how they are treated will determine just how much of your crisis response will be carried out successfully.

A crisis is a show-stopping, people-stopping, product-stopping, or reputation-defining, trust-busting event that creates victims and/or explicit visibility.

Crises are caused by human beings through commission, omission, accidents, negligence or ignorance. Larger forces, generally natural events, usually cause disasters — tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes. Disasters can produce victims, but unless responders act negatively or behave carelessly or callously, a disaster brings with it far less potential for blame.

Creating victims is what makes a crisis a crisis. The greatest barriers to appropriate victim management are denial, lack of leadership and a fear of liability fostered by advice given to management by well-meaning counsel. Any credible way to reduce or mitigate this fear is essential.

The most significant causes of litigation and lousy visibility during crises are the ignored or discredited needs of victims, victims' families and survivors — and the failure of leadership to aggressively manage the victim dimension.

Leadership's focus on victims sets the tone for the entire response effort. Management should be supportive, break down barriers and act like family to those who are injured or are suffering as a result of what is going on.

Management should motivate employees and responders by being present where it's dangerous or difficult — to encourage, help build understanding and appropriate concern, and to help employees through what often are difficult, psychologically stressful and emotional times.

What Does It Mean to Be a Victim?

Being a victim is a self-perpetuating, self-energizing state. It ends when the victims by themselves determine to let go of what is adversely affecting them and get on with the rest of their lives.

No matter how damaging an event, only a small number of individuals will actually feel victimized — even in mass casualty situations. Every person suffers differently, experiences pain differently, and needs to be treated individually.

Dealing with victims becomes difficult because they instantly become self-absorbed and self-focused on the problems and afflictions of being a victim. Victims constantly ask questions but rarely actually hear the responses. Attempts to help are often interpreted as efforts to control and to minimize responsibility. Poor communication prolongs victimization.

Victims have four powerful needs. If these four needs are provided promptly — preferably by the perpetrator — victims can more easily move through their state of victimization and be less likely to need or to call or respond to attorneys, the media, or even to call attention to themselves:

• **Validation:** acknowledgement that they are indeed victims. Best rendered by the perpetrator.

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• **Visibility:** a platform from which to describe their pain and warn others. The platform should come from the perpetrator.

• **Vindication:** the need victims have to take credit for any action by the perpetrator to ensure that whatever happened to the victims will be prevented from happening to others.

• **Apology:** directly and promptly tends to dramatically reduce victimization and virtually eliminate the potential for litigation.

Generally, victims sue if their situation is not acknowledged and their feelings are ignored, belittled, discredited or trivialized.

Getting Leadership Ready for Crisis

A prudent organization has studied its vulnerabilities, identified those that present the greatest risk, and gets ready with what it must do and say to respond quickly and effectively in the face of a crisis.

All crises happen explosively and instantly. All, however, are remediated incrementally, often over long periods of time. Work to replace the concept of crisis management with the term readiness.

When we analyze the most important components of readiness, we get a snapshot of what it takes to be ready:

• **Accurate contact information:** Always knowing the whereabouts of key decision makers is 75 percent of readiness.

• **Pre-authorization:** Decisions made in advance to expedite action are 15 percent of readiness.

• **Extensive scenario preparation and testing:** Practice and preparation exercises are 8 percent of readiness.

• **Surprise:** The unexpected is 2 percent of readiness.

When readiness is a part of company policy and culture, the CEO and senior executives endorse and participate in readiness. The factors that cause strategic efforts to fail are detected, deterred, prevented or eliminated. Identify and eliminate risks. Failure to eliminate risks by identifying vulnerabilities actually raises risk levels.

Successful communicators focus on substantive matters. They are driven by and make their choices based on a simple set of guiding principles:

• Choose the truth.

• Quantify what you want to accomplish.

• Project who you want to be.

• Plan to have significant impact.

Preparing for Crisis and Visibility

Much of your credibility will depend on your systematic, knowledgeable approaches to developing the kind of information that managers need to make critical operating decisions when emergencies occur. Readiness preparation for a possible crisis begins with visibility analysis, examining the possible sources of crises, their planned visibility and their unplanned visibility.

The first phase in the analysis of your organization's planned visibility is to conduct a community involvement audit or visibility audit at the corporate level. The audit identifies those activities in which your organization is involved. Put small groups of supervisors and active employees together to do the analysis for each geographic location where your business operates.

The second type of exposure your organization is subject to is unplanned visibility. We refer to them as vulnerabilities. This is also a small-group process. The first part is to identify vulnerabilities. The second part is to make simultaneous qualitative judgments about the impact, likelihood of occurrence and collateral damage caused by a specific vulnerability. The vast majority of corporate visibility is planned and comes from those activities carried out routinely.

• **Planned visibility:** City/regional/national/international events, civic/philanthropic organization participation, company-sponsored events and participation, governmental interaction, products/service/promotion and delivery, and schools and educational participation.

• **Unplanned visibility:** The result of some unintended operating process outcome that affects people, animals or the environment and attracts the attention of the news media, specific groups or government. Analyzing vulnerabilities takes impact, chance of occurrence and collateral damage into account.

Effective decisions and actions must precede communication. Emergency communication response priorities must address appropriate operational action and match the expectations of all potential audiences.

The more promptly actions are taken in response, the more quickly recovery can occur.

• **Priority #1: Stop the production of victims:** The very first priority is to get the emergent situation under control, stabilized or eliminated, but this is precisely because it will stop victim production.

• **Priority #2: Manage the victim dimension and those most directly affected:** What we say and do for victims are our most important strategic objectives. Effective communication with victims and their families reduces media interest and coverage while building the trust of the community.

• **Priority #3: Communicate with employees:** After survivors, employees are the crucial audience for crisis communication. Employees need to know their roles during a crisis, particularly if they have crisis-related duties.

• **Priority #4: Communicate with those affected indirectly:** Persons affected indirectly include survivors, neighbors, government officials and regulators, community leaders, customers, suppliers, shareholders, allies, partners, collaborators and co-inventors or co-marketers.

• **Priority #5: Communicate with the media, other self-appointed external individuals and communications organizations:** How you behave and how responsive you can be will determine the tone and quality of media coverage. An empathetic, prompt, professional approach will help to ensure the best possible coverage under the circumstances.

One of the most difficult problems to resolve in crisis response is tying field operations and responses together with the concerns and controls required by corporate headquarters.

Creating the Crisis Communication Plan

Crisis communication must drive the other two aspects of contingency planning — business continuity management and disaster recovery. Too often, these three disciplines carry out their planning separately in isolation, only to watch their efforts collide to the detriment and embarrassment of the organization when a crisis occurs.

A crucial part of the planning process involves cataloging, analyzing, cross-referencing and coordinating all response requirements.

Your corporate-level preparation should focus on four broad areas:

• Non-operating problems that can be managed effectively only at the corporate level, such as those affecting reputation, integrity, credibility, shareholders, or that may have government impact.

• Umbrella guidance, coaching and training that send the unmistakable signal to the division, brand or field that this work is crucial and that operating people are expected to be involved.

• Development of useful scenarios and models to reduce the time necessary for division, branch or field operations to be involved in planning and testing their responses.

• Prior authorization for those actions and decisions that can facilitate coordination, reduce bureaucracy, and move the response process forward with greater speed.

We have divided the plan development process into five specific tasks:

Task 1: Existing plan assessment and refinement: Review and assess existing communication plans and notification processes to determine crisis response capability and readiness.

Task 2: Corporate crisis plan development: Identify and prioritize existing and potential operational and communication threats.

Task 3: Communication guidance for divisions, branches, remote facilities and franchise owners: Develop guidance and model approaches in the areas of managing the four or five most critical high-profile local scenarios, identifying vulnerabilities and assessing their potential, and developing local approaches.

Task 4: Communications coaching and training: Executives and managers should be coached on the corporate approach, processes and policies to follow during crises.

Task 5: Installation/simulation, ongoing readiness training: Untested plans fail. Identify specific processes and procedures to help ensure that the company is appropriately and adequately prepared to manage communication.

Scenario preparation is the crucial ingredient in effective emergency and crisis response. General crisis planning simply fails to work. The scenario approach allows you to work in a future-thinking mode. Developing scenarios is among the most powerful team-building and team-unifying activities that leaders and responders can undergo.

When a crisis or seriously negative event occurs in today's world, everyone heads to a website before they look for anything else. Failing to have a website in place and ready to go often leads to mistaken stories and stories based on erroneous assumptions. Crisis websites must meet the test of being simple and sensible. The site needs to be positive and constructive. Comments need to be relatively brief so that the visitor can read the materials, absorb them, and easily use them. Avoid using any negative language or phrases. Use the power of the web to manage media coverage and reduce media calls. Provide information 24/7, and script everybody.

Media Relations

Media relations during emergencies are crucial not just for your company but for media organizations as well. The crisis has the potential to create big business for the news media.

The first step in managing relations with the social and traditional media is to establish a sensible, professional crisis media relations policy. Here is a sample approach:

1. Regional managers and Headquarters Media Relations (HMR) employees are the designated spokespersons.

2. All other employees must secure prior approval from HMR for any outside publication, speech, interview or other communication with the media.

3. Media calls from national and international media should be directed to HMR.

4. Calls for financial information or overall company information should be directed to HMR.

5. Local media calls are to be handled by local managers when regional regulatory activity, local employee information or regulatory questions are involved.

Good Spokesperson Practices

In times of crisis and catastrophe, bad things happen fast and control is lost quickly. It is the spokesperson who sets the tone, tempo and expectations:

- Remain calm.
- Coordinate all comments with the crisis website.
- Avoid all negative words, phrases and descriptions.
- Disclose some facts immediately and continuously even if the news is bad.
- Treat the media professionally and with equality.
- Treat all inquiries fairly and promptly.
- Stick to the facts.
- Avoid "I don't know," guessing and speculation, making estimates, and flatly refusing to provide information.
- Release information about victims only after families have been notified and with their permission.
- Think before you respond.
- Monitor media coverage, correct and clarify. Have an ongoing strategy for correcting and clarifying mistakes that has little reliance on the media.
- Prepare answers for the most likely questions.
- Speak with compassion.

More and more companies are establishing template sites, sometimes called *dark* or *stealth* sites, which are pre-organized and populated with pre-authorized information. They are set up to respond immediately to the general nature of crisis and to specific scenarios and are used to get ahead of the negativity often caused by delays in responding to situations of public interest.

These dark sites reside on a server. As information is developed, various portions of these sites are reviewed, authorized and go live as circumstances warrant. These sites feature a "fill-in the blank" architecture in which key information can be easily inserted and promptly made widely available, especially to employees and the news media. Having a website with basic information immediately available can reduce media relations calls by up to 90 percent.

Take these steps before the news media arrive:

1. Develop strategic communications objectives, specific statements, messages and stories.
2. Brief communications staff, executives and employees about who is coming and why.
3. Share your communications objectives and messages widely within your organization.

While the media are there:

1. Stick to the script.
2. Stick to a time schedule, and schedule briefings as necessary. Hold group briefings that enable all reporters to hear the same thing at the same time.
3. Establish a place where reporters may gather as they arrive, such as a conference room.

For news magazine shows:

1. Negotiate — get something for everything given.
2. Cooperative but reluctant. Always express an interest in cooperating, but maintain a very realistic sense of skepticism.
3. Rigorous but circumspect. Remember that they are not on a mission to help you or your organization. Keep good records.
4. Professional but concerned. It is always about emotion and answering specific questions. Put very little in writing. Verbalize most of your responses.
5. Message driven but alert for more data. Preparation is a surprise-reduction process.
6. Be alert. These shows practice very blatant ongoing deception with story subjects and targets.
7. Maintain perspective. Resist the urge to take anything personally — not the questions, not the situation, not the show's manner of handling them.

Sure-fire ways to make bad news even worse:

- Lose your temper.
- Call the reporter and demand a retraction.

• Attack the medium on your website.

The lesson for the spokesperson is that to be an effective communicator through the news media to the publics you wish to reach, verbal skills and habits must change. It is the spokesperson who must refine, refocus, redefine and more carefully describe those things that are important to communicate. If the translation is left to the reporter, you may not be pleased with the results.

The Crisis News Conference

The news conference remains an effective way to communicate when a crisis occurs; you must especially manage many reporters and a great deal of often-conflicting information. The successful crisis news conference requires planning and preparation even when there is little time.

Types of Crisis News Conferences

There are three formats for dealing with many news media — news conferences, briefings and backgrounders.

A *news conference* is a structured meeting in which many news media are represented. In very dramatic cases dozens to hundreds of media representatives can be present. The goal is to answer questions and get messages across to many different media at the same time. Usually there are one or two spokespersons. The basic format after opening comments is Q&A.

A *news briefing* is a structured open meeting where complex information is presented, explained and provided to the media verbally and in writing. Many individuals from the organization may talk with the news media either by making presentations or simply by answering reporters' questions. Anything said at the briefing is on the record and available for use by the news media.

A media *backgrounder* is a fairly structured meeting to which only specific media are invited to attend and participate. The information is given on the promise by the media that it will neither be used in a story nor attributed to the source of the information. The purpose is to give reporters proprietary or crucial information that must be kept confidential but that they need in order to cover a specific story. Be careful with this format. The reporter's first impulse is to get what they hear on the record somehow and promptly. Avoid off-the-record backgrounders. If it is a secret that matters, it will get out. The best briefings are those that are on the record.

Setting Communications Objectives

Here is a procedure for identifying your communication objective and defining the messages that you need to convey:

Step 1: Write out your communication objective for the news conference in up to 150 words (about one minute of speaking time) each.

Step 2: Try to state in a sentence or two each up to three really important messages or themes about the topic or subject of your news conference.

Step 3: Say your communication objective and your messages out loud (rehearse), and refine the language so that you can say them comfortably and often.

Step 4: Draft your second or third communication objective as described in step 1, and develop messages as described in steps 2 and 3.

Once you have completed the development of your communication objective, drafting your opening statement becomes relatively easy.

The Opening Statement

Here are the attributes of a good opening statement:

• Up to 150 words in length (one minute).

• Positive words and language.

• Packaged or bundled key ideas and groupings of three facts, five ideas, four key thoughts, etc.

• Constructed to generate specific and positive follow-up questions first.

• Stands on its own and gives complete information.

• Creates the positive perception you seek.

• Contains benefits to the reporters and their audiences beyond the features of the topic or reason for which you are having the news conference.

Conducting the News Conference

1. Determine who should represent your company: We recommend a maximum of three speakers at a news conference. One should be a generalist. The other one or two should be experts on the product or situation so that every question receives at least a partial answer. When there will be more than one spokesperson, extra rehearsals are mandatory.

2. Set the scene: A designated individual should begin by introducing him/herself along with those involved in the news conference and by explaining which areas each will talk about. News conferences should last only 30 minutes. Introduce each principal.

3. Make the opening statement: It should be no longer than 30 seconds so that broadcasters can use it in its entirety. Organize facts, starting with the most important information, the way reporters do. Put the event in context, and cast a positive light on the company's safety practices. This controls at least the opening portion of the news conference.

4. Handle the question and answer period: After the opening statement, ask for questions. Be sure that you have written the statement in a way that will elicit the questions you want to be asked.

5. Close the news conference: The person who opened the news conference should stand up, thank the media for coming, and remind them about handout materials, follow-up, the next briefing, etc. Offer to remain behind to handle news media questions on an individual basis.

Social Media

Social media have injected new intensity, urgency and effectiveness into the media relations equation.

- News travels in milliseconds, not minutes, hours or days.
- More than one billion people — combined active Facebook and Twitter users — can discuss your organization or client, its products and its competitors in just a few minutes.
- Anyone communicating online becomes, in effect, a publisher, reporter, author and a member of the Media.
- Most professional journalists live online every day, many searching social channels for scoops.

Google, Bing, Yahoo, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr, Foursquare and now more than two dozen others enable everyone with Internet access to locate, relate, analyze and comment on an infinite number of topics. Social media can be your company's enemy or friend.

New media and social media, when managed correctly, can help to communicate the point of view of your company in very difficult situations. Blogs and online media can help you diffuse and respond to online attacks and crises. The opposite is also true — if you fail to monitor your news and conversations in the media and are slow to respond to emerging news stories in social media, you can experience a humiliating, self-imposed type of crisis.

Developing a monitoring strategy and putting it in place as part of the crisis plan is essential. You can take advantage of companies like BrandProtect and Risdall.com/listen, which provide reputational monitoring services. Stay ahead of instant news coverage by monitoring blogs and social media via searches using keywords for your organization.

The basic rules of media relations still apply whether you are dealing with traditional or social media. To neutralize an Internet crisis, it is essential to remain calm, manage your assumptions, investigate and verify the facts, and monitor exposure in all media. Then diagnose the problem, conduct a threat reality check, examine your options whether or not to respond, and lastly, preempt, control and contain.

The Activist Challenge

Activist groups, as always, add interesting challenges to communications. Activists are emotionally committed to opposing and targeting you and are against traditional corporate behavior. To win, large organizations have to be as committed to victory as their critics are committed to defeating them.

Understand the power of activism and the activist mentality. Prepare to negotiate. Ignoring activism is toxic. Advancing the corporation as a victim is weak. Almost all corporate and government targets are considered to be guilty of something at first.

Anti-corporate actions can be anticipated both through aggressive enforcement of standards of conduct and compliance review and by paying attention to the perceptions created by appearances. Be prepared to preempt these characteristic patterns of action aggressively. Avoid the obvious, the stupid, the callous and the arrogant behavior.

Often there is very little in the way of concrete evidence on either side. The imperative is to respond or anticipate with a sense of energy, control and focus. Real on-the-ground facts and information can be controlling. Get some; get there first.

Stay focused on the ultimate goal. Make incremental progress every day. Make certain that those who are affected directly and indirectly know progress is being made and what your next steps are. The more you interact directly with those whose lives, families and future you affect, the less important what the media does or says becomes.

If you have a sense of activists' tactical approaches, you can then analyze your own operations and behavioral vulnerabilities and plan appropriately. If it's important that your story be told accurately, clearly and effectively, plan to do that yourself during and after the incident. Companies lose to activists primarily because they are less committed to managing their own destiny.

Litigation and Legal Issues

Get ready by preparing for anticipated crises, making sure that management is aware of the legal ramifications of any lax compliance and developing for yourself a knowledge of how law and lawyers operate and how best to handle the media in the event of high-visibility litigation.

Corporate behavior patterns that predict trouble are easily recognized but often ignored. If you keep an eye on your company's approaches to regulated activity, you can easily detect operational facts and behaviors that reveal either the existence of or potential for troublesome, perhaps criminal, corporate behavior. Here are seven critical steps:

Step 1: Establish a centralized compliance function: This function oversees compliance and adherence to standards for the entire organization.

Step 2: Appoint a senior-level manager as senior VP, compliance: This individual has overall responsibility for establishing an effective compliance program.

Step 3: Train all employees, agents, vendors and customers.

Step 4: Establish a reporting process: Set up a mechanism through which employees, agents, vendors and customers can anonymously report compliance violations or inappropriate behavior.

Step 5: When violations are found, take appropriate, consistent and prompt disciplinary action: Standards without enforcement do not work.

Step 6: Communicate immediately and conclusively about compliance violations: Public acknowledgment is a powerful deterrent.

Step 7: Commit to constant improvement: These situations are opportunities to review standards and procedures, to eradicate weaknesses in the organization's ethics and compliance process, and to educate.

Legal risk assessment must be added to your scope of issue negotiation and problem prevention. Reputation-threatening legal risks arise from several corporate behaviors, all of which can be avoided: arrogance, selective disclosure, deception, ignorance, insensitivity, intolerance, secrecy, stinginess, stupidity and tardiness.

In law as in corporate life, the individual who can focus on the needs and problems of the people is the individual with the winning strategy. All litigation involves victims. Think, plan, talk and act with the victim's perspective in mind.

Settlement talks can start at any time. Hire a separate law firm to manage the settlement since litigation has to proceed until the matter is resolved. There is an inherent conflict between the litigator and the negotiator.

Settlement activity often eliminates or substantially reduces litigation visibility. Settlement happens privately, is sanctioned by the court, and much of what is discussed cannot enter the records of the actual case.

I always recommend to clients involved in potential or actual litigation that they propose settlement talks immediately, managed by an independent law firm that specializes in settlement.

Summing Up and Looking Ahead

My general expectation is for future problems, issues and behaviors that have been crises in the past to remain high potential candidates for crisis situations in the future.

Remember that Lukaszewski's first law of crisis survival is to recognize that forces like the government, new media, old media, your toughest critic or your most aggressive competitor are rarely successful in bringing you down. It is the perpetrators themselves, through their statements, actions and/or the statements of well-meaning employees, friends, even relatives and especially over-confident leaders, who sabotage the competence of responses in crisis.

The single most powerful, strategic approach to succeeding in crisis response involves extraordinarily positive language combined with behaviors that support contention reduction and resolution of the issues, such as victim circumstances and taking actions that prevent the types of criticism that prolong negative crisis coverage and perceptions.

If you pay attention to victim treatment and management; express regret, empathy and apology; expedite compensation; do 120 percent in every direction on every issue in question; and answer every question, these behaviors will help reduce, even mitigate, crisis impact.

In the end, it is up to you, guided by your personal values, concerns and empathetic sense of rightness.

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Lukaszewski on Crisis Communication*, you'll also like:

1. ***Crisis Leadership Now* by Laurence Barton.** Barton provides a framework for building crisis management thinking into a company's strategic toolbox.
2. ***Turnaround Leadership* by Shaun O'Callaghan.** O'Callaghan pinpoints five areas of leadership expertise that need to be mastered to recover after a crisis brought on by changes in technology or a company-specific issue.
3. ***Stronger in the Broken Places* by James Lee Witt, James Morgan.** Witt, former director of FEMA, shares a strategy for managing crises that is customer-centric.