

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By BERNARD LUSKIN

Incidents without precedent

I've received an extraordinary number of communications from people who are now or have been in positions requiring responses to "incidents without precedent."

As head of Fielding Graduate University's media psychology program, I've been able to discuss "incidents without precedent" with doctoral candidates whose livelihoods require expertise in disaster management and recovery.

In crystal clarity I've come to see that the most important question today is: "If you are challenged with an incident that you have not previously experienced, *are you ready?*"

How are we doing?

Stunned, we watched helplessly as the media coverage unfolded during and after hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The flooding, the helplessly trapped people, the subsequent evacuations and the eventual finger-pointing presented issues never dealt with before.

If you're in a position of responsibility during such an event, your evaluation will most likely be handed down by the court of public opinion. That court receives much of its testimony from the media.

"Media Psychology" is now an academic discipline. A practitioner can examine the human behaviors involved before, during and after events—along with their media results. According to practitioners, there are four key factors involved in developing a worthwhile media strategy.

1. Learn from the mistakes of others.
2. Identify best practices that will serve your organization in situations of extreme stress.
3. Know the audiences to whom you must respond.
4. Include ethics and integrity in the preparation of your response, particularly when you have to decide whether to disclose, or even expose, controversial events or decisions.

Captain Greg Walsh is head of the anti-terrorism group in central New York for the New York State Police. "Careful thought has to go into what I tell media during an event. That includes when I tell them and how I tell them," observes Walsh. "Rudy Giuliani did a fabulous job of informing the public on September 11, 2001," he adds.

In a critical situation, Captain Walsh is one who well knows that you have just one chance to get your response right the first time.

The smoldering crisis

Two adjectives may be used to categorize crises—smoldering and catastrophic. The smoldering crisis is the more common of the two. It can begin as an issue or event that is either poorly managed or not managed at all. Though any crisis can eventually cause major damage to the reputation and finances of an organization, many can be contained by averting flares of public confrontation.

One striking example is Bill Clinton's handling of the exposure of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. A more immediate and candid response would have helped. A good media psychologist might have suggested a statement such as "I regret having had an inappropriate personal relationship with Ms. Lewinsky. I apologize to my wife

and family, to my staff, and to all others who may have been hurt by my actions. I was wrong. I am truly sorry and I'm seeking counseling to try to heal some of the pain I have caused, and to ensure that I never repeat my mistake. My family and I will appreciate your respect for our need for privacy during this difficult time." With a proper response, the Lewinsky story would have faded in a few weeks.

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out. Revealing a painful truth, one difficult layer at a time, is like peeling an onion. It may bring tears, so clouded vision is to be avoided.

Be sure your vision—and your status reports—are very clear before you report that a crisis has passed. Recall the inaccurate reporting of the coal miners who were trapped in West Virginia, then saved. What a painful retraction and aftermath when just one miner actually survived!

The catastrophic crisis

It strikes without warning. An earthquake, terrorist attack or the sudden death of a key person will

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generate news coverage. Depending on circumstances, the coverage can have negative consequences, even cause civic or business interruption for long periods of time. Any organization can suffer a catastrophe.

To prepare the media response to a catastrophic media crisis, be ready to:

- Tell the truth and tell it quickly.
- Respond in *internet* time. Real time in 2006 moves much faster than in 1996.
- Think from the outside in. Keep your audiences well in mind.
- Monitor the media and the web.
- Get organized. You'll need the help of a pre-identified team.
- Enable a dialogue. A two-way opportunity helps with stakeholders.
- Set up a hotline.
- Have an action plan.
- Consider the ethics, credibility, and integrity of your response.
- Think before you speak.

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There used to be a news cycle that could work in favor of an organization faced with a crisis. For minimum impact, bad news could be released at the end of the business day, preferably on a Friday or the day before a holiday. Today there is no news cycle. It's a non-stop, 24x7 feed. Issuing bad news late on Friday in the U.S. only accomplishes giving Asian news organizations fresh material for their morning newscasts. Meanwhile, tell the ongoing story, or someone else will tell it for you.

“Media ethics is central to my teaching about media and the law,”

says attorney Paul Wright, executive director of the International Center for Arbitration and Mediation.

Bad news does not easily go away. However, it is more difficult to recall significant incidents which were properly managed, because they passed or diminished without excessive media attention.

Professional development is appropriate and needed within higher education. All graduate level leadership programs should include the development of skills for managing media responses to incidents without precedent. ■

Maurer

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The Digest of Education Statistics.

An annual report with a compilation of statistical information from pre-kindergarten through graduate school. (<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest>)

Indicators of School Crime and

Safety. A joint annual effort of the Bureau of Justice Statistics and NCES, the report examines crime occurring in school as well as on the way to and from school. (<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators>)

Education Statistics Quarterly. An overview of work done across all of NCES. Each issue contains short publications and summaries of NCES publications and data products released recently. Also published here are notices concerning training and funding opportunities. (<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/quarterly>)

On the other hand

Both casual and professional users complain about the delayed, out-of-date data. Professionals using the raw data sometime encounter lapses in accuracy. And, the agency's reports and summaries are often dry and on the dull side, rather than “hot topics.”

Educational policy and research mavens like Tom Mortenson, of the Pell Institute use NCES and census data regularly and extensively in their work. Sandy Baum, professor of economics at Skidmore and senior policy analyst for the College Board, calls the NCES staff “wonderful, helpful and knowledgeable.”

Mortenson and others regret the long delay in data availability, which is often caused by NCES editing and verification efforts. It's not uncommon for recently released NCES data to be two years out of date. Mortenson says the solution

involves quicker collection and availability via the web.

When NCES gets a low score, it may not be the Center's fault. Data availability changes over time. Baum herself wants access to clear trends in college revenue and expenditures over time. But little of value is available in those categories, because of accounting standard changes that make longitudinal data incomparable.

In fact, when the college staff who are responsible for IPEDS submission changes, inaccuracies often follow.

Campus managers and instructional leaders can use NCES and other data sources for improving current activities and setting future policy. We've listed a “Higher Education Manager's Guide to Education Data” on GreentreeGazette.com. ■