

The Insider

Crisis, Culture, and Conflict
Management.

BDS
insight

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This Month

Theme Luck & Grace

Crisis Crisis Communication:
How to plan, what to say,
how to review.

Culture &
Conflict
Management Getting Comfortable with
Conversations about
Culture.



Being Lucky, Being Gracious

We live in a country steeped in the traditions of the self-made pioneer. We feel a sense of pride in knowing we did something well, all by ourselves. We compete with ourselves to see how much better, harder, more successful we can be today compared to our yesterdays. March is a great month to pause, reflect, and extend a thanks to those whose shoulders we stand upon even as we succeed, and as you will learn a bit later, much of that success is often just luck that worked in our favor.

The first week of March is "Send a Letter of Appreciation Week". We think this one is so important that we committed to doing it each week this month. Here's how your team might try it:

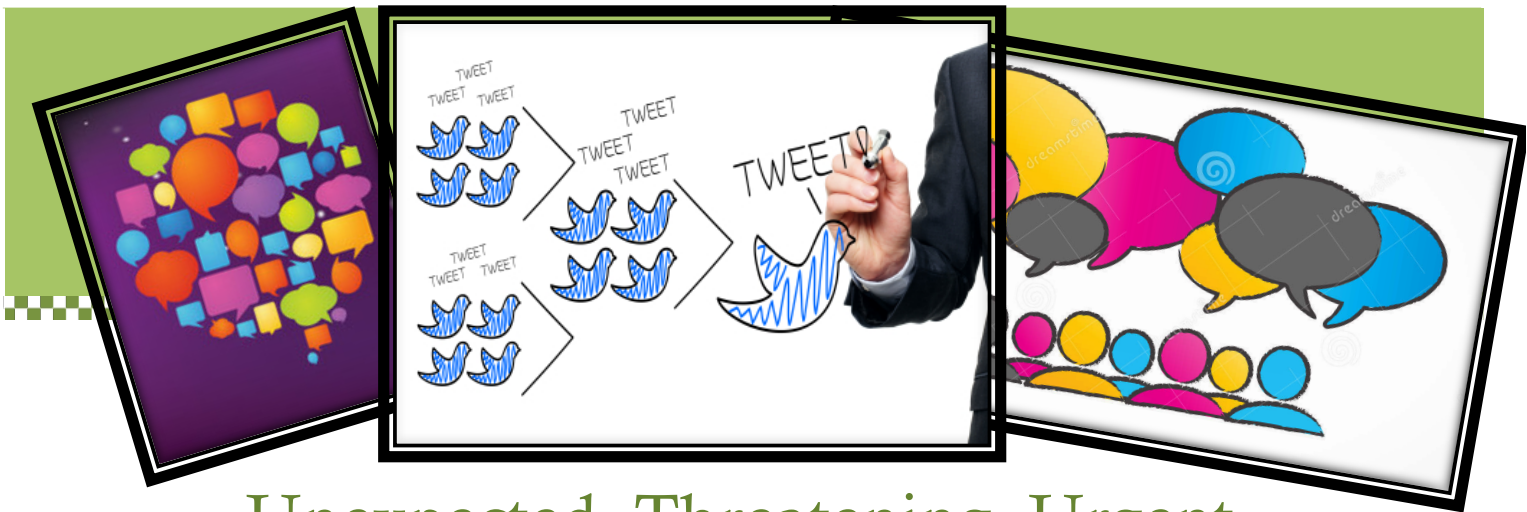
Think of a connection that opened a door or championed a project. It might have been very recent or long ago. Whatever the case, dig up your contact, pick your best stationary, and handwrite a sincere thank you. We don't expect these little spots of sunshine in our chaos so it can have a huge impact.

The third week of the month is "Allies in support of those marginalized and disenfranchised". While it is a mouthful, just think about ways your team can step up for someone who has been shut out: of access, recognition, or support. Pledge to understand and support.

Embracing Chaos

"I finally figured out not every crisis can be managed. As much as we want to keep ourselves safe, we can't protect ourselves from everything. If we want to embrace life, we also have to embrace chaos."

Susan Elizabeth Phillips, Breathing Room



Unexpected, Threatening, Urgent

Years later, Hermann's (1963) view remains accurate. A crisis is all these things and more.

A worker injured, a weather event disconnecting a department, a social media campaign launched against you. All these events require careful and quick responses from an organization in order to Every CMP Is about mapping out post-event how your team will Prepare, Respond, and Recover to operational capacity while allowing and facilitating review and correction.

Crisis preparation involves four steps. 1) **pre-event assessment** for risk; need to identify probable, likely, and possible risks for your organization. 2) **Identifying and preparing a crisis response team** and set of spokespersons. Organizing your team allows you to build trust, learn short hand code to make communication more efficient,

and become aware of individual strength and weakness that might impact the team. Once the team is assembled the work can commence. What work? 3) The team **assembles a crisis portfolio** allowing for shared knowledge from prior events while building models for unknown future events. The portfolio is both an output and a process. Collecting items, reflecting on events, and processing information post-event are all process components that sharpen your team in their response ability build shared knowledge and group trust. The portfolio then forms an institutional record of events and lessons learned that gets updated and refined over time. The second "deliverable" is the **crisis communication system plan** that documents the policies and

procedures associated with (intra/inter)-organizational communication. Included in the plan are key contacts (media, risk management, personnel, board) and talking points (mission, program descriptions, partnership outlines). Finally preparation involves building in a 4) **review system**. A review system entails building in a plan to circle back after the event and review what aspect of the plan worked well, where trouble spots existed, and where were opportunities to go off script that opened unexpected opportunities. The lessons learned and changes in process or policy get updated and added to the crisis portfolio originally established in step 3. (CONTINUED)

Three Rules for Social Media and Crisis Messaging

Does your organization have a social media presence? If so then keep these 3 tips handy for crisis communication.

Tip 1: Know all your profiles. Simple to ask, hard to know. A master list is nice, better still, use a tool like Hoot Suite or Buffer to create a dash-board for multiple postings from a single webpage.

Tip 2: Be conscientious but don't overpromise.

There is a real desire to share as information comes, or to say when more word is going to be shared. But know your logistics and limits. Setting a future time for updates is good but only do so if you know you can update when you say you can.

Tip 3: Be clear and consistent across all messaging forums. Your audience, including those in your organization, will seek multiple sources of input and if your message isn't consistent across all those forums you will be inundated with clarification requests and adding stress to those trying to support from afar.

Crisis Communication (Continued)

Think about any crisis communication efforts as having 3 “jobs”: issues, reputation, and risk management. The first job is in **providing accurate and updated information** about the specific event and issue. The “who, what, when, what next” questions that media and stakeholders will be asking are a top priority in communication. Beyond that, **conveying early and big picture knowledge** to the community about why the event has occurred is another important issue related communication task. Messages are also about supporting, burnishing, or managing **organizational reputation**. How you position the message will impact what the public, your team, or your clients think about you long after the event has resolved. Lastly, risk management is a real and serious priority with any communication effort. Conveying how key decisions have been made, supports that have been accessed, and how your organization intends to shift in response to these events go a long way to setting the stage for accountability and integrity that makes or breaks organizations post-event. Practice using neutral language while communicating genuine interest and knowledge. In general people respond better to honest “we are not yet sure” than offering surety without real accountability.

Common Errors

Crisis communication is really information processing. What does this mean? Just as learning new information and communicating it to another person takes time and can lead to misunderstanding, so can communicating in the face of a crisis. **People are prone to make mistakes** in their information processing. There is often a **bias** that exists in how we process new information. Other errors that can impact communication are groupthink, serial reproduction errors, MUM effect, and message overload. **Groupthink** occurs when there is so much cohesion in a team that no one voice is willing to articulate dissent. When this happens, the “hive mind” can lead the team into a bad choice. Crisis increases the pressure to conform, and this in turn increases risk for errors related to groupthink. One solution is to develop a practice that allows for someone to play the ‘devil’s advocate’ role. It is important that either this role is assigned and shifts throughout the team, or that the individual in this role is not personally held to account for chronically dissenting! It is an important job. You can approximate this by simply asking “tell me why it won’t work/why it is the wrong idea”. Giving people authentic permission to disagree without ramifications is a powerful way to minimize this common error. **Serial reproduction errors** are associated when bad or erroneous information takes on a life of its own and continues to be distributed by each additional messenger. It is common, difficult, and somewhat unavoidable but it is a risk that can be mitigated by recognizing the repetition, repeatedly and publicly displaying the corrected information, and in some cases completely reframing the information as new data. Can’t shake the wrong impression that the event will result in closing all branches? Then announce that all branches will participate in a “Grand Re-Opening” celebration. This course-correction allows for a new narrative, and humans love a story. Owning the story is the key to leading through change.

Ever notice how hard it is to tell someone you like they are doing something wrong? Some reluctance is about not wanting to embarrass or upset another person, while some is about not wanting to feel uncomfortable ourselves. This hesitation has a name, called the **MUM effect**, and social scientists have long observed how we censor ourselves when sharing negative information because we don’t want to be associated with the news that made them feel bad, threatened, or upset. During a crisis there can be a lot of gatekeeping and protection of leaders that occurs. MUM effect opportunity are ripe for the picking, so be proactive in developing a culture where people are free to be honest, even with the hard stuff. Is that vendor really not ever going to work with your team again? You need to know that, and reacting aggressively to bad news only sets the stage for more informational withholding. Finally, a big piece of communicating is knowing when to stop! **Message overload** can lead stakeholders to tune out completely. Control the frequency of communication and provide details clearly. Provide methods for those details to be reviewed by stakeholders, but don’t feel the need to communicate every 5 minutes unless there are legitimate updates to provide. Long term, make an effort to change the conversation by thanking those who stood by your side throughout the ordeal. It sends the signal that the event has ended and that you are still open for business.

Want more? Try reading Ulmer, Robert R, Timothy L Sellnow, and Matthew W Seeger. *Effective crisis communication: Moving from crisis to opportunity*. Sage Publications, 2010. Or book a training with us.



Microaggressions are verbal & nonverbal interactions that un/intentionally and repeatedly draw distinctions between majority and minority members. These interactions may seem benign, but repeated in all settings over long time spans has a cumulative and toxic effect. It leads those who are minority to withdraw and leads those in majority positions feeling excluded. Real dialogue can raise awareness and reduce the occurrences but not without acknowledging different starting points.

Getting Comfortable with Conversations about Culture.

Members of majority groups often struggle to engage in conversations with those outside their group on issues of culture and diversity. This difficulty has sometimes been characterized as a lack of interest, but research suggests there are other factors at work. By age 5, the amount of conversations about race and racial differences that have been observed by and had with young children of color are much higher than the conversations had and observed by white children. Why? Researchers speculate that families of diverse backgrounds engage on issues of diversity more often because it is an effort both the process the experiences they are having daily and to prepare their children and family for the experiences they may one day have. This protective effort leads to greater experience and comfort with discussions about race and difference among many individuals with racial and ethnic minority experiences.

How do you strengthen skills in communicating across cultures throughout your organization? Different backgrounds will mean different weak areas. There is no uniform task list that will make conversations easy and equip staff evenly. Choices will need to be made about how to start and structure dialogue. Individual identity and background will result in different skill and need areas. This will lead you to being sensitive to why and how conversations are engaged differently along group lines. When one person or group has a comfort and knowledge base that is less familiar and accessible to others there will be discomfort and challenges associated with the conversation. Preparing for that and laying groundwork before hand can help limit the impact of negative conflict.

Cross-cultural conversations can yield important initiatives when done in a way that is focused, genuine, and authentic. Freeing participants from feeling they will “mess up” while educating all staff on microaggressions and how to avoid them in conversation can go a long way towards improving the quality of cross cultural exchanges. Ignoring difference is never a solution when there is a need to build connections between groups. Equipping all staff with the knowledge and skills they need to improve their intercultural competence will greatly enhance effectiveness in team leaders.

Read more: Trawalter, Sophie, and Jennifer A Richeson. "Let's talk about race, baby! When Whites' and Blacks' interracial contact experiences diverge." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*



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