

Crisis Communications 101: Seven Phases of a Crisis

Police are pretty good at handling crises ... you do it almost everyday, and are trained, and in fact paid, to take care of other's problems. But, when a crisis stares a law enforcement agency in the face, the old fight, flee or hide response may want to kick in.

There are lots of definitions of crisis out there, but when it comes down to it, it's an incident that grabs people's attention, grabs headlines and could potentially heap negative publicity on you or your organization and ruin the reputation you've worked so hard to establish and maintain. Almost 63% of companies that experience a serious crisis are no longer in business two years later. Now, as a police agency, you have no worries there, but as mentioned in previous articles, police rely so heavily on public perception, if the community in which you work is having problems with you ... you have problems.

Let's take for example, a police officer being charged with a criminal offence. Many police agencies would choose not to proactively release the information, especially, if it isn't a 'serious' offence. Trouble is, police are held to a higher degree of accountability than the rest of the general public, and as public servants, the people that fund your paychecks do have a 'right to know'.

What do you think makes the bigger story, the short news release about the officer charged for shoplifting or the reporter being at the courthouse, recognizing the cop being brought before the courts and calling the department and being given the run around? You're right. The big story isn't the cop being charged, it's the department's reluctance to be forthcoming with information. You've probably heard this one before, and it's worth repeating - if you mess up, fess up! Remember what they say, it's better to eat crow ... warm.

Most crises don't happen out of the blue. There are what are called "prodromes" or in English, indicators, that a crisis may be around the corner. Internally, they'll be disguised as a 'disgruntled cop', a problem investigation or an employee with an addiction. Externally, look for a unique situation, public passion or someone on a personal crusade.

However, even if you're vigilant, the first phase of a crisis is almost always **surprise**. The reporter calling to ask about a party falling out of the back of the wagon early one morning. The Major Crime investigator dropping by to announce the department is about to lay charges against an internationally known personality. Takes one's breathe away, and the excitement (or dread, if you're not much of an adrenaline junkie) builds.

The second phase is **insufficient information**. If you don't know the details, you need to find out ... and fast! In most crisis, this can be a prolonged phase, especially if you as the person responsible for communicating, are not in the right spot on the food chain. I encourage every police manager to take a hard look at their organizational structure and make sure the person tasked with communicating to the public is of the correct rank and authority to get the information that is needed quickly and accurately, and has the ability to release it without jumping through too many hoops.

Phase three is usually characterized by an **escalation of the event**. First one media outlet has the story, and by noon, everyone is calling about it.

Police hate phase four, and that's when you as an organization **lose control** of the story. You're dancing as fast as you can, but the media is burning up the floor. Here, it's crucial to have a single knowledgeable and credible person speaking on behalf of the department.

Phase five can last a while, and that's **intense scrutiny** by the public. Depending on what the public

perceives the severity of the crisis to be and how you've dealt with it, the scrutiny could last for days or years. Think Rodney King and the decades LAPD has remained under the microscope.

While this intense scrutiny takes place, phase six could set in, and that's a **corporate siege mentality**. It's hard to be in the public spotlight for an extended period of time without wanting to close down the avenues of communication and shut yourselves away from the intense attention.

And finally, phase seven, where you are so intent on the crisis and "getting it over with", you forget the big picture and end up having **short term focus** instead of forcing yourself to see the big picture.

The best thing about crises is that they too shall pass. Can you remember what the headline was on yesterday's major daily?

About the Author

Judy Pal has more than 25 years experience in the field of communications and broadcast journalism. She has taught public relations at the university level and has worked as a reporter, producer and news anchor, as well as a PIO for a large law enforcement agency and municipal government. For more information on media relations and media training, please contact the writer at info@prforpolice.com.