

## Crisis Communications 101: The PEP and CAP Principles

Any police officer worth his or her badge knows how to take control of a situation gone bad -- the traffic stop that turns violent or the domestic that becomes an armed standoff.

But what is your department prepared to go public with after officers have conducted a massive drug raid ... on the wrong house; or after a constable shoots a young person thought to be carrying a loaded handgun ... which turns out to be a toy; or the Anthrax hoaxes that spiraled out of control after 9-11; or the police officer charged with sexual harassment? Now is not the time to shut out the media or the public. It's time to employ two very simple principles of crisis communications - PEP and CAP.

When a crisis involves harm, people's feelings and emotions overpower fact. In most cases, that feeling is fear. What you say in the first few hours, or even minutes, sets the course for how you and your department will be perceived during the entire incident. Remember, the public is looking to its police for guidance, reassurance and leadership. You are the higher authority they seek direction from.

That being said, when developing your messages to the media (and in turn the public), keep PEP in mind - that stands for **People, Environment and Property**. There's a popular crisis communications chart that shows basic overall community priorities. It starts with personal health and safety and ends with economic considerations. Conversely, corporate priorities often begin with economic considerations and end with health and safety. So, when crafting your message, make sure the first thing out of your PIO's (Public Information Officer) mouth is the concern your department has for the safety and security of the people involved. The second message can focus on environmental issues and lastly, deal with property or economic concerns.

That goes hand-in-hand with the second principle, CAP - which stands for **Concern, Action and Perspective**. It's been proven that if you show genuine concern off the top, people will be more apt to listen to the rest of your messages. This is extremely important in a crisis situation.

For example, in our "oops, wrong house on the drug raid" scenario, start by showing empathy for the people whose house was raided (Concern), explain how it happened and what actions will be taken to ensure it doesn't happen again (Action), and finally, explain how the situation will be rectified for the victims of the mistaken address and provide stats on how many raids are done safely without incident (Perspective).

In the instance of the police-related shooting of the youngster with the toy handgun, by keeping CAP in mind, you know the first thing you must convey is the department's concern for the victim and how this incident could have happened. Then, you will address the issue of action the department will take (shooting team investigation, etc.), and finally, you have an opportunity to convey an important message about the scope of the seriousness of the situation (Perspective), and craft some strong messages about the tragic hazard these toys present.

Many departments faced the third scenario about a year ago. The public and media were in a frenzy during the Anthrax scares after 9-11. Although frustrating for emergency services personnel, it was important to deal with the public's fear. Concern for the safety of citizens was number one, evacuating areas and testing substances came secondary (Action), and finally, putting the incidents into perspective helped allay those fears. Sometimes humor works here. One police PIO was quoted as saying; "We're not going to send the HAZ-MAT team out every time someone drops a donut on the sidewalk". It put people's fears into perspective, and gave the media a bit of a wake-up call in an effort to stop the self-perpetuating fear factor that was developing.

In our last scenario, where an officer is criminally charged, you must remember, police are held to a higher degree of accountability than the rest of the public, and your department's honest and heart-felt messages of concern must be first and foremost. You must tell the public what will action can and will be taken to address the situation, and then carefully put the situation in perspective. This scenario is not for the faint of heart, nor can it be justly dealt with in one paragraph.

Using CAP and PEP can help you build the foundation for messages your department will have to convey to the public during a crisis. A good crisis communications program will help maximize the community's perception of safety and security; and minimize damage to your organization's reputation. Are you prepared?

### ***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](mailto:info@prforpolice.com).