

# **Crisis Communication Tips**

**For Educators**

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Santa Clara County  
Office of Education

## **It Could Happen Here...**

Along with the horror of the Columbine High School shootings in April 1999, came the shock that the tragedy happened in a bucolic, affluent suburb, not an inner-city urban area. In the aftermath of the massacre that left 15 dead, including the two teenage gunmen, officials, faculty and parents across the country became less inclined to say "It can't happen here."

"It was no longer possible to disassociate — 'Oh, that's something that happened at some faraway town in some other state,'" Glenn Muschert, associate professor of sociology at Miami University in Ohio said in a news story. "People started to have the perception that 'it could happen here.' "

The legacy of Columbine and other school tragedies is a heightened awareness that school administrators need to know what to do when bad things happen.

School administrators need to know how to anticipate a crisis, write a crisis plan, deal with the crisis and evaluate the plan and response to the crisis.

**So...**

# Anticipate a Crisis

The first thing you want to do, and probably the most disliked job, is to ANTICIPATE bad things that could happen.

What would happen if your site had a bomb threat, a gas leak, a suicide, an overdose incident or hostage takeover? What would you do if there were an earthquake or a weather-related calamity? Or, how would you handle alleged mismanagement or scandal? Or a contagious disease sweeping the campus?

Brainstorm every possible disaster you can think of that might occur in your district or at your school. Next prepare a written outline of what needs to be done for each crisis. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. There are plenty of templates out there for you to follow.

In today's digital world, rumors can spread across the campus --and far beyond -- through the Internet and cell phones. School administrators must also have a plan to control the distribution of misinformation.

## For example

An incident in which an armed student was detained by police near a Bay Area high school in 2009 led to a four-hour lockdown and hundreds of hysterical parents arriving at campus. Disregarding instructions from school officials, students used their cell phones to text, call and email that a gunman had taken over the campus and 2,200 students were being held hostage. Because parents and students lacked accurate information, rumors became "facts."

# Use a Hot Sheet

Put a Hot Sheet into operation. It helps you to anticipate a possible crisis.

Use a Hot Sheet reporting system. Ask all of your managers to be alert to negative happenings. If a crisis is suspected, managers fill out the sheet and send it to the appointed supervisor. Review these Hot Sheets in a routine manner, perhaps at a weekly cabinet meeting, and be prepared to bring in key individuals to solve the problem before it becomes public information.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SUMMARY OF HOT ISSUE</b></p> <p><b>Date:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Initiator:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Staff Involved:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Site/area:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Statement of problem:</b> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>Consideration (education, legal, policy, budget, PR, etc):</b> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>Recommended action:</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>Signature:</b> _____</p>
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**If you're prepared,  
you shape the story.**

# Write Your Plan

Along with outlining how to respond to and manage a crisis, you need to **WRITE A COMMUNICATION PLAN**.

- 1. Appoint a crisis management team.** Have standing members who will always be involved, then add members depending on the type of crisis.
- 2. Designate a spokesperson.** Strong leadership is a must. Consensus management techniques must be set aside in favor of one decisive leader. The school or district in crisis operates in a fish bowl. Therefore, the spokesperson must be caring, concerned, credible and well informed. The superintendent is the best person for a district crisis and the principal for a school-based crisis. Passing the microphone around is usually a poor policy.
- 3. Identify your internal and external audiences in this written plan.** Too often, in a time of crisis, a very important individual – the board president, a parent, the mayor, a legislator, the union president, or internal staff – might be inadvertently forgotten. Each has an important relationship to the school and should be kept informed.
- 4. Decide on effective communication modes:**
  - **Web site** Create an emergency Web Page linked to the district or school Web site for daily updates.
  - **Emails and faxes** Set up an email listserv to stakeholders who need to be contacted regularly, including staff, media, parents and elected officials.
  - **Social networks** Use Facebook, Twitter and other social networking tools to provide information quickly to parents and other stakeholders.
  - **Hotline** Dedicate a phone line to emergency information and update it frequently.

- **Phone Tree**
  - **Letters**
  - **Face to Face** If there is time, set up a public meeting to answer questions.
5. **If you anticipate needing help during a crisis** – phone calls, typing, writing, email and fax dissemination – **have a list of individuals you can contact to assist you.** (Contact the SCCOE for assistance.)
  6. **Establish evacuation methods and transportation.**  
Have access to building maps, keys, copies of your emergency procedures, evacuation routes and phone lines. List emergency contacts on this form. You will want to include key managers, local police, fire and medical contacts.
  7. **Identify counseling services ahead of time.** List names and phone numbers; then all you have to do is pick up the phone and ask for assistance.
  8. **Update your policies and procedures annually.** How do you deal with communicable diseases, personnel issues, your Web site, social media, and text book selection? Your policies and procedures not only give you something to talk about when you can say very little, but, more importantly, they tell your public that you know what you are doing and are prepared for any issue.
  9. **Finally, distribute your written plan to those who need to know:** Crisis management team members, district/school staff and emergency responders.

# Prepare Board Members

During intense public scrutiny, school district board members can become targets if they do not followed some basic rules:

1. **All board of education meetings should be run in a formal, agendized manner.**
2. **Speakers need time limits.** If you typically have informal meetings and the public is allowed to comment at any time during the meeting, the precedent will make meetings longer and more difficult if you ever have to deal with a crisis.
3. **Speak in one voice during a crisis.** Develop core messages about crisis response.
4. **Don't violate executive session.** Know the Brown Act. Except for a few clearly defined exceptions, the public has the right to watch the board in action.
5. **Don't ever divulge contents of executive sessions.**



# Communicating about the Crisis

1. **Deliver your initial message as quickly as possible.** Speed is crucial. A few facts early on will reduce the potential impact of a negative news story. Your credibility in the first 24 hours of a crisis is imperative if you want the media and the public to believe you are responding with truth and sincerity.

Any delays in responding will be viewed as a coverup or stone-walling. This will immediately place you in a position of presumed guilt – a position from which it is difficult to establish innocence. Say and do things that will show the media that management is seriously concerned about what has happened and is taking action. Management should impress upon the public that it is making every effort to correct the situation.

Remember, if the reporters don't get their information from you, they will get it from somewhere else, and it may not be accurate.

2. **Target and prioritize your internal and external publics.** Review the list of publics you incorporated into your written plan and update it if necessary. Next decide what message you want to send, when you want to send it and how you will send it – letter, email, face-to-face, etc. Also, decide who will send the message.

## For example

“Successful communications during and after a crisis require that you listen, respond to concerns and show compassion. Be truthful above all else. Messages must be accurate and timely and communicated through multiple mechanisms.”

-- Kenneth S. Trump, school safety consultant

3. **Speak in one clear voice.** All information needs to be consistent and everyone needs to be on the “same page.”
4. **Make the media part of your solution.** They can help you get your message out. Let the media publicize school or site closures or re-openings for you. They will also promote hot lines or information phone numbers. Let them know what you are doing and what your scope of authority is. This will help the public better understand your role.

### For example

“The most important lesson learned (from the Columbine tragedy) was a clarification of the most important asset – relationships. Strong relationships within the communication team, within the organization, with other agencies, with community leaders, and especially with students and parents can make or break a successful crisis communication program.”

-- Christian Anderson, former Jefferson County Public Schools administrator

5. **Set up a separate “news room” or outdoor staging area for the media.** Make sure there are electric outlets and phones or cell phone signal access. If you have wireless Internet, provide the pass code for a limited time. Establish a perimeter for photographers and satellite trucks and set guidelines for video cameras. Escort the media everywhere.
6. **Set up a separate “war room” for staff – away from the media.** This will permit privacy when strategizing.
7. **Don’t ever ignore public perception.** Assume the public’s point of view. Put yourself in the shoes of a parent or taxpayer. The tendency is for management to downplay the seriousness. It is safer to err on the side of taking the crisis too seriously than to underestimate how the media will cover it.

- 8. Start building partnerships right now, if you haven't already begun.** That way you will have your own personal contacts during tough times. These individuals might be reporters, editorial writers, key communicators and union representatives who can fill you in on what is being said or believed on the outside. Maintain close contact with these individuals throughout the crisis so that you are never blindsided.
- 9. Don't speculate.** Say: "You are asking me to speculate and I just can't do that." Speak to policy and procedure if you have nothing else to say.
- Provide the media with fact sheets containing names, titles, biographies, dates, places, and other public information such as the year the school was built, the number of students and staff, and special programs housed in the building.
  - If confidentiality is an issue, say so. Then speak to process.
  - "No comment" at any point in a crisis is unacceptable.
  - Consider setting up a news conference to present your message to a variety of media representatives seeking the same information. Prepare speakers with fact sheets, talking points or frequently asked questions. Also consider arranging media interviews with those who were directly involved in the crisis.
- 10. Monitor the news for accuracy.**
- If there are factual errors, contact the media and request a correction, especially for copy posted online.
  - If the tone or perspective doesn't accurately reflect the situation, request a meeting with the reporter or editor to present your side of the story.

**11. Consider the life of a story.** You may need to do day two, day three and day four updates, depending on the circumstances of the event. You don't want to "feed" the story – that is, keep it alive – but, on the other hand, you must respect the public's right to know.

- Have you promised information – costs, task force appointments, changes in policy/procedures? You need to provide that information to the media.
- Ask reporters what more information they might need. Have your briefings at the district offices away from the students so that their learning is not disrupted.
- Look for positive stories to share with reporters.

# Evaluate

Bring your team together after the crisis to review the event. Pay attention to your critics. They will provide you with meaningful information and perceptions.

Adjust your plan accordingly.

Write thank you notes to all those who played key roles in resolving the problem.

Crises often reveal an organization's true culture. Others will judge you during this period. The public forms images when the heat is on and these can last for years. You can improve your organization's image during periods of intense media focus by effectively communicating with the public.

## **Media List**

For a complete listing of the Bay Area print and broadcast media, contact the Santa Clara County Office of Education's Communication Services Department at 408-453-6514.

**This booklet was prepared by the  
Santa Clara County Office of Education  
Communication Services Department**

The Communication Services Department serves as the SCCOE's public information office and provides services to the news media, oversees internal and external communications via the Web site and award winning publications and events; provides services in the areas of graphic design and print; and promotes partnerships with the public and private sectors in support of the SCCOE and school districts.

We are here to help you! If you would like more information, you are invited to write or call:

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