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Crisis Management

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Crisis Management

Abstract
[Excerpt] It's no longer a matter of WHETHER a crisis will happen or not, it's a matter of WHAT TYPE it is and WHEN it occurs. An organization (and its union) that can manage and recover from a crisis demonstrates competence – the results can mean survival, growth, and profitability , which also means preserving and growing jobs while building reputations and trust.

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CRISIS MANAGEMENT
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It's no longer a matter of WHETHER a crisis will happen or not, it's a matter of WHAT TYPE it is and WHEN it occurs. An organization (and its union) that can manage and recover from a crisis demonstrates competence – the results can mean survival, growth, and profitability , which also means preserving and growing jobs while building reputations and trust.

What makes a 'crisis'?
This is a situation where an organization either (a) doesn't have sufficient or accurate information to make decisions or (b) lacks the resources to control the situation – and the situation unfolds with an escalating flow of events that needs to be managed. During a crisis, the organization has to manage the problem while under intense scrutiny from outsiders, the media, and its own workforce. Where a workforce is organized, the union also experiences the crisis -- not just from the situation itself, but also from its members' perceptions of how the union is responding. A crisis can lead to a siege mentality where both management and labor may feel under attack from all sides. How well the crisis is managed may determine the long-term survival of the organization (and thus jobs) as well as the survival of the union or its current leadership.

Crisis management attempts to identify an organization's vulnerabilities to a wide range of problems in order to <u>prevent</u> crises from occurring. Not all crises can be avoided, but they can be managed through **planning** and **effective communication**. There are so many excuses (oops! "reasons") organizations don't do planning, considering it a waste of time until a problem actually occurs, then they will try to think on their feet. Unfortunately, in real life, when the problem hits, we can't depend on people becoming creative problem-solvers when under intense pressure or scrutiny. *A good business case can be made here:* crisis-prepared organizations tend to stay in business longer and be more profitable or fiscally-stable.

Yes, it is tough to think about the unthinkable. We don't want to imagine that things could go terribly wrong. But, if we want to be better prepared, we start by forming a **team**: if a workplace is organized, that team can be joint labor/management. However, within the union, having its own team can help it to address its own internal issues of preparedness and communication. The team develops a crisis plan by analyzing and evaluating the organization's vulnerability to crises and then developing crisis response strategies and interventions. A diverse team is critical in order to better identify possible threats – what might be perceived as a crisis from some members' points of view, may be considered routine and manageable by other members. Team members may include: upper levels of management and the union, human resources, the employee assistance program, security, health and safety, financial and legal departments, operations (including various worksites), maintenance, public relations, and (highly recommended) at least one front-line employee.

The team begins its work by conducting a **crisis audit** to determine **vulnerabilities** as seen by all functions within the organization. The team considers possible vulnerabilities and any natural- or human-caused crises the organization could face, as well as crises that have happened to organizations similar to their own. The team evaluates the extent of damage these crises could cause and the effects they would have on employees, the organization, and its customers/clients. Next, the team examines the preparedness of the organization to manage these crises. They should even consider what would happen if more than one of these crises occurred at the same time or simultaneously with a natural disaster. (After all, maybe you could manage an equipment failure crisis very well – if only your replacement equipment and technical support could arrive despite the on-going blizzard.)

Of course, your team will probably uncover several situations that could become major problems, so how do you prioritize where to put your efforts? It helps if you review your assessment to identify the **most-likely** or **most-damaging** crises that could occur in the workplace and especially look for those that the organization is not prepared to manage. Organizations need to anticipate problems of all sorts; some examples could be: major equipment failures, serious legal trouble, lost intellectual property, a damaged reputation, or an outbreak of illness in the workplace.

Next, the team reviews current policies/procedures for managing crises, and the union can look at its responses accordingly. For each crisis, the team develops a plan to respond to the problem and manage it. These plans will become the crisis response manual so everyone knows their responsibilities during a crisis. Even when plans are skeletal or the crisis unfolds in a different way than you imagined, a basic plan means that you don't have to invent everything from scratch in the middle of a crisis.

It would be very helpful to be able to **head off a crisis** – that would mean being able to recognize early on that one is developing so that you can respond quickly enough to make a potential crisis into a non-event. You want bad news to travel upward in the organization so that you can deal with the crisis at its earliest stages. You may want to consider recognizing/rewarding people for alerting the organization to possible hazards.

As you develop a crisis management plan, try to identify all the stakeholders –any persons or entities who have an interest in the situation's outcome. See how the crisis might look to them – then you can figure out how you will need to interact with them, what resources they might have available in a crunch, or how you can best communicate with them. Clearly, employees and their union are critical stakeholders: how does management communicate a crisis with the employees/union and the union, in turn, with its members?

As you prepare your plan, include guidelines for identifying how the plan will be triggered, as well as for monitoring or evaluating the situation.

Good **communication** is critical: sometimes an organization handled the crisis well, but communication about the crisis led to the perception by employees or the public that the crisis

was badly managed. The crisis plan lists staff, their crisis responsibilities, and the organization's key stakeholders (including the media and the public), indicating how communication will be handled with them. All personnel must know their individual responsibilities and to whom or where to report. The crisis manual addresses who will communicate about the crisis. (The rumor mill can be creative, but not necessarily accurate.)

To ensure **recovery** after a crisis, it is essential for the organization to focus on the most basic functions of the organization, not necessarily everything you had before the crisis happened. Especially imagine what will be the needs of people – so that you can make sure that they are getting the support they need as they do the recovery work.

Of course, even with the best of advance planning, things can still go wrong. It is so vital for an organization to take care of its people so that critical incident stress does not become post-traumatic stress disorder. When employees are given an opportunity to understand the effects of critical incident stress and the value of acknowledging their emotions, they recover faster, stay healthier, remain more productive on the job, and experience less disruption in their home lives. Some people find it helpful to attend a critical incident stress debriefing in which they may discuss their experiences and feelings, gain a sense of perspective, and de-stress. For those who consider this insufficient or uncomfortable, follow-up counseling and individual sessions should be made available. Organizations need to encourage the use of these resources to promote health and recovery. In a unionized setting, employees may seek their union's member assistance program instead.