

ARTICLES

The Roles of Security Agencies and Media in Managing Crisis: The Simple Guidelines

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Introduction

An unexpected scenario seldom occurs in organisations. However, once it strikes, it would possibly be the catastrophic. Organisations or countries for that matter must at least once experience disaster. It may appear in a different nature. Nevertheless, it is still a catastrophe.

There are many expressions used by people around the world indicating disaster. One distinguished declaration that has been commonly applied is *krinien*, originally from the Greeks, or better known as crisis.

Crisis commonly resembles doomsday, a major breakdown that damages badly the image and reputation of an organisation. Being defined by Barton (1993) crisis is a “major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results. The event and the aftermath may significantly damage an organisation and its employees, products, services, financial condition and reputation”.

However, in today’s scenario the definition above can be improvised. Firstly, the writer strongly believes that crisis occurs because a phenomenon is not attended to proactively. Organisations have not taken the initiative to seriously manage issues. Therefore, a crisis is not an unpredicted event but somehow an issue that was not given the attention in the earlier stage. Secondly, from the word of Sun Tzu in the Strategy of War, crisis means “wei ji”, a combination of danger and opportunity. To be an effective organisation, one must envisage and anticipate forthcoming disasters depending on the types of industries where the threat could vary such as environmental harm, plane crashes, chemical hazards, strikes, bankruptcies, explosions,

fires and many more. As soon as problems are detected, the organisation must develop and determine strategies and tactics before proceeding into battle. Once danger is predicted and strategies established, the opportunity for improvisation or change for the betterment is obvious. At times, crisis is a blessing in disguise as it allows the organisation to reengineer its entire identity and reputation to be better than before. Thirdly, *krinien* means, "decide". The understanding is that it should encourage management to be in a position to think and act positively, efficiently and proactively before, during and after the crisis. But how and when do we decide? Who is responsible? What is the right method? As long as we believe that crisis is a turning point to a better future, there should be preparation by the management in managing and responding to crisis before, during and the aftermath.

Crisis management and crisis communication

Crisis is an inevitable phenomenon in every organisation. Organisations can never be isolated from crisis and ignorant about not knowing what to do before or when crisis takes place. Being prepared at all times should be the ultimate solution in managing crisis and to be certain of positive outcomes in the aftermath. Therefore, planning is essential. In dealing with crisis, two approaches are functional; managing crisis and responding to crisis.

Crisis management is designed to reduce threats and lessen damage. It identifies the situations, plans and outlines the contingency plans. Basically, a Crisis Management Plan (CMP) is occupied with instructions. Establishing a CMP is vital as today's scenario proves that the public is becoming more educated, knowledgeable, exposed and aware of their rights which, all in all, make the public become more vocal than before. Therefore, organisations must be certain that public opinion is well considered and their interest are best taken care of especially during emergencies. At most times, top-level management with the combination of all departments would take the responsibility to establish a CMP. This is inclusive of the chief executive officer (CEO), legal advisor, treasurer, medical officer, human resource, corporate communications, engineers and others depending on types of business that the organisation is venturing on to be involved in making the CMP a success.

Crisis communication refers to the communication actions executed as strategies with the purpose of preventing or overcoming a catastrophe. Besides, it is established to foster good relations with the media in providing the truth and avoiding speculations and accusations for being irresponsible to the various publics. It focuses on the communication with third parties especially in intervening special public, such as next of kin, media, government, authorities, NGO's etc. A crisis communication plan is usually written in the form of a manual for easy guidance. Often times the plan is called a crisis communication manual (CCM) and is attached together with the CMP. It is advisable for an organisation to establish a CCM before involved in crisis. This is crucial due to the fact that employees need to be educated on certain aspects of the CCM such as techniques

of responding to and managing the media, forming interim statements, avoiding passing rumors, identifying accurate information to be released to the public and many more. Furthermore, a CCM needs to be activated at all times in order for the employees to be familiar with emergency and non-emergency situations and to avoid panic among them. CCM does not end here, as it has to be revised and improvised due to changes in technologies and environment. Public relations practitioners are responsible for creating the CCM for the organisation, as they are qualified in managing communications for an organisation.

Roles of security agencies to the media in a crisis

Diseases, political grudges, economic downturns, terrorism and environmental harm are among the threats that Malaysia has experienced. Fortunately Malaysia has managed and responded intelligently to many catastrophes. This is simply because crisis is no longer new to the Malaysian government but a catalyst to a better future. Security agencies are among the many agencies in Malaysia that are responsible as the peacekeepers of the country. Armed forces, the police and the fire brigade experience many forms of crises at all times. Hence, they should be well prepared and equipped with strategies, tactics, techniques, and expertise besides being well equipped with apparatus and appliances. In times of crisis all security agencies must activate its own crisis management and crisis communication manual to avoid panic among the public. The media are the most crucial public to be attended to due to their function in disseminating news to the public. It is one of the primary ways of reaching the public with practical information. The media are the sole provider for the public to rely on in getting information when a crisis takes place. Therefore, security agencies must be certain that the media are being attended to and conducted effectively with the intention of attaining a positive image and reputation.

In the case of the Iraq war, the Pentagon and the media are accused of applying propaganda. According to Anup Shah ([www.globalissues.org/Human Rights/Media/Military.asp](http://www.globalissues.org/Human_Rights/Media/Military.asp)) propaganda can serve to rally people behind a cause, but often at the cost of exaggerating, misrepresenting or even lying about issues in order to gain that support. Common tactics in propaganda that is often used are; using selective stories, providing partial facts, narrow sources of experts, reinforcing reasons and motivations, etc.

Pentagon is accused of filtering information, providing limited facts, planning topics with reporters and at times, telling lies. Are these accusations true? If yes, what could be the reason? Quoting Katherine Graham, Washington Post owner speaking at CIA's Langley, Virginia headquarters in 1988 "We live in a dirty and dangerous world. There are some things the general public does not need to know about and shouldn't. I believe democracy flourishes when the government can take legitimate steps to keep its secrets and when the press can decide whether to print what it knows" (ibid).

Therefore, in the Malaysian environment, the security agencies should consider the aspect of propaganda as an issue that could arise once crisis takes place. Secondly, security agencies must realise their functions and roles to the media that are required in times of crisis. Security agencies must be able to conduct and manage the media constructively as to avoid being accused of lying and hiding the truth.

Prior to getting the support and assistance for good media coverage, the security agencies must initially understand their roles towards the media. There are five basic roles that need to be fulfilled by the agencies. One, it is important for the agencies to understand that the media needs stories from reliable sources of authority and credibility. The spokesperson must then be a person with the right position or expertise. Agencies must also remember that the person must be trained before seeing the press. The spokesperson must be able to articulate legibly, have good communication skills, be comfortable in front of the camera, be polite and most of all comprehend the subject matter. Besides, the spokesperson must go through a practice on answering tough questions despite the fact that the public relations person has anticipated questions that would be asked by the reporters during any press conference or talk shows. Failing to understand this role would endanger the agencies' image and thus, efforts to bridge the rapport between the media and the agencies would be futile.

Secondly, it is the responsibility of the agencies to create a media center which is fully equipped with computers, faxes, video/teleconferencing, telephone and internet lines etc. that would assist the media when reporting on the crisis. The center must be a distance from the office of the crisis communication team in order to avoid information leakage from happening. However, it should not be placed at a totally different venue in order to avoid being accused of hiding information. Besides having the media center, agencies can also take the media for a media visit around the crisis area with the supervision of the authorities. This would enable the media to have better insight when reporting.

Thirdly, prepare the media contact log. It is important to create an action sheet for every story where it can be recorded for easy access later. The sheet is in a column form where column one would consist of day, date and time, column two, name of journalist, paper, station, agency, telephone number, mail and e-mail address and fax. Column three would be topic of the story, deadlines and follow-up of the story.

Fourthly, agencies should prepare two types of statements, the holding statement and the interim statement. The holding statement refers to an early statement confirming the crisis. Agencies must firstly introduce the spokesperson's name and position and then briefly describe what had happened and overview the company's responsibility towards the crisis. This information is critical for the media in the early stage of the crisis for the purpose of reporting to the public and by doing so the agencies are helping the media to obtain true information easily. Thus, without hesitation the media would respond to the hospitality equally positively to the agencies. The interim statement is equally important as it is designed to prevent misinformation. It should be established before the communication strategy and key messages are constructed. The media needs information urgently during a crisis even before it has taken place. Therefore agencies must be prepared to furnish the media with information as early as possible. Failing to

do so would encourage rumors to be spread and agencies accused for being irresponsible and many more. At this point in time, information that can be relayed is brief yet accurate confirming that a crisis has taken place, there is death and the number of death is still unknown or that situation is under investigation etc.

Lastly, agencies must determine the method of public statement. There are two types of public statements; press conference and press release. Before press conference can be held there are tips that agencies must take into consideration to determine priorities on which information to be aired, will be aired and must not be aired. Never give personal opinions, avoid off the-record, headlines response, and keep the information short and simple, prepare and anticipate questions and answers beforehand and do not volunteer information if not asked. These are the wrong doings that lead to problems encountered by many when facing the media. Thus, it is best to keep information discrete rather than revealing them without being asked. The media should not be blamed for the wrong doings of the agencies in times of crisis. In addition, a press release is also important to inform the media on activities planned by agencies during and the aftermath of the crisis or any information regarding the crisis. Agencies are required to have a person with journalistic skills who is able to write as how the media wants. The person in-charge of the press must understand editorial lineups such as editorial calendars, writers' guidelines and journalistic desk and more importantly, having good networking with the press even prior to the crisis.

On the whole, agencies are supposed to be proactive in providing true and fast information before the media could actually express their interests. Agencies also must keep all promises they made to the media especially in providing information. All roles mentioned above are essential and necessary for the agencies to consider, as it will help better understanding while working with the media in times of a crisis in order to fulfill each other's needs and wants.

Media roles in crisis

In times of crisis, the media have always been accused of creating propaganda or cooperating with the organisation's concern of not telling the truth, exaggerating on facts or hiding information. As in the case of the Iraq war, military control of information was said to be the major factor to propaganda. Furthermore, there were embedded journalists who were managed by the military that had control on the message. What should the media do in times of a crisis? Is the media in a dilemma? Is the media obliged to the security agencies? The media too have roles in a crisis. By getting all the assistance from the agencies, the media understand the nature of the crisis, the consequences to the nation, and the media should be able to report legibly, ethically and effectively on the crisis by providing the truth.

Firstly, the media should provide information in stages due to many reasons. One is to avoid panic, second, to prevent confusion, third, to encourage understanding and gain empathy. The media with the help of the agencies must distinguish news in the order of importance and urgency. At the beginning of a crisis, the media should not

alarm and frighten the public but inform the incidences with basic information applying the 5W and 1H (what, when, why, who, where and how).

Secondly, the media should work hand-in-hand with the security agencies in order to get reliable information from credible sources. Spokesperson of agencies must have the authority and expertise in managing the crisis involved. This person must be able to furnish media requirements and at the same time be aware of the limitations. The media must be ethical in questioning and reporting the crisis because the public will believe their writings and the media have the responsibility to provide the truth. Besides, the media can also be a helping hand by spreading news on the actions and activities planned by the agencies to overcome the crisis. This would calm the public and avoid tarnishing the image of agencies and the nation as a whole.

Thirdly, the media should be sensitive to censorship. The media must realise that the public is categorised in many different age groups, genders and frame of references. Therefore, the public perceives issues differently; with different opinions, views and ideas. Obscene, unsympathetic, cruel, inhuman, immoral pictures and remarks would engage anger, panic, fear, etc among the public. Thus, the public would not benefit from the reporting but develop greater setback and hindrance. As a matter of fact, the media is not meant to create trouble for the public but to unify them. Therefore, the media should be cautious while reporting.

Fourthly, the media should avoid bias reporting. The media should help agencies deal with the crisis by giving fair reporting. It should avoid taking sides and be neutral at all times. Report the truth and let the public decide. The media should interview reliable sources and therefore should always consult the agencies for any information. The media must at all times convince the public that crisis is inevitable but it is a turning point to a better future. Never underestimate the efforts taken by agencies to resolve crisis, but support them with the purpose of peacekeeping.

Next, the aftermath of a crisis depends on the media coverage. Positive, objective, truthful, balanced and convincing reporting on a crisis would reduce or even eradicate the chances of the public becoming aggressive and destructive. At this point in time, the media should highlight on activities and future planning, report on stability, harmonious situation, productivity, social development, etc. In other words, the media helps to boost the image of a country.

Lastly, is being ethical. The media has its ethical conduct that they are bound to. The ethical guidelines are sufficient in guiding the media for reporting and writing the truth to the public. In the case of the Iraq war, the media in a dilemma of reporting the truth, but in the Malaysian context, freedom of speech is practiced. The media should be able to distinguish between the right and the wrong-doings, the truth and the myth in reporting in times of crisis.

Recommendations

The writer would like to recommend actions that can be applied by security agencies in times of crisis that is suitable to the Malaysian environment. Firstly, each security

agency must establish its own crisis management team comprising the top level to the lower rank employees. If a major crisis takes place, all security agencies must merge and establish one major crisis management team. The members should be inclusive of the medical authorities and legal advisors, besides having specialists in certain fields. Secondly, create a crisis communication manual (CCM). A CCM would help the agencies to respond before, during, and after a crisis. The person in charge of the CCM must be someone who is familiar with communication, especially in dealing with the media.

Thirdly, the Ministry of Defense should establish "Security and Media Rules". The media would probably not understand the nature of working with the military and they need to be guided especially during a crisis. This is the first step that can easily be implemented in educating the media to understand the nature of the military working system. The Pentagon has established Pentagon Media Rules. According to the rules, open and independent reporting will be the principal means of coverage of U.S military operations.

Lastly, security agencies should provide media training to the crisis management team. They should be trained on handling media interviews, the do's and don'ts, tips on appearance, answering tough questions, preparing statements, etc. By doing so, agencies can work better with the media as the responsibilities in times of crisis are mutual though the functions different.

Conclusion

In times of crisis security agencies and the media are responsible in managing, responding and highlighting the respectable image, skilled and expert actions and decisions, sensitivity and the sense of understanding of the country in the eyes of the world. Both parties have the obligation towards the country for peacekeeping and therefore the two-way communication, mutual understanding and respect are required.

The image of a country relies on good media coverage. Security agencies must collaborate with the media in distributing information efficiently and accurately though at times information is private and confidential to avoid panic among the civilians. The media must understand the nature of working with the security agencies and the consequences of actions beyond limits. Both parties must understand and listen to each other's interest and needs, not just find faults and accuse one another. Crisis management and crisis communication would be a great help in solving problems before, during and after crisis. The media must emphasize to the public that crisis is no longer a doomsday but is the beginning of a better life. Security agencies with the assistance of the media are the best combination of a responsive team to respond positively to the public in times of crisis.

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