Preparation for the Unthinkable

A crisis can hit at any moment, and every legislature needs a plan.

By Mitsh McCartney

New York City Hall was rattled by the fatal shooting of Brooklyn Councilman James Davis during a city council session last year, posing a tragic and immediate crisis for leaders.

The priorities were to care for the injured, secure the crime scene and determine what had happened. The area, however, was instantly swarming with media providing live coverage of the tragedy's aftermath and speculating on the events that took place.

City council members who were interviewed in the moments after the incident offered reporters tidbits that drove the news coverage of the event minute-by-minute. As details of what happened became apparent, briefings from Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and other officials slowed the media frenzy.

ALL KINDS OF EMERGENCIES

Crisis come in all shapes and sizes. They don't always involve a violent act, but can take the form of natural disasters or political controversies. Since Sept. 11, 2001, many government institutions, including state legislatures, have reviewed policies and procedures for crisis management.

Key government leaders and corporations know, from painful experience, that preparing for a crisis allows organizations to react quickly, restore public confidence and address internal concerns. Effective crisis communications planning ensures that the public receives timely, accurate information.

The need for developing a legislative crisis communications model was first identified by Sheila McCant, public information officer for the Louisiana House of Representatives. When studying the potential of developing a plan for her institution, she found there were no models or guides to help her.

In response, the Legislative Information and Communications Staff Section (LINCSS) has developed a set of guidelines for creating crisis communications plans.

LINCSS recommends that plans:
- Ensure the flow of accurate and timely information to legislators, staff, the media and the public during a crisis.
- Provide the media with a reasonable level of access.
- Make it possible for key communications staff to develop unified messages.
- Minimize unnecessary damage to the integrity and reputation of the legislature.
- Counteract inaccurate criticism by providing accurate and honest information.

HERE'S HOW YOU DO IT

Establish a crisis planning team. This initial small team should include at least one person from the media communications staff, a chief of staff or key legislative aide, a person from legislative administration and a person from the legal staff. These are the experts who should provide objective and analytical advice.

Identify and define crisis situations. A crisis is any emergency or situation that can affect the integrity, reputation or public confidence in the legislative institution or its membership and has the potential to disrupt the legislature's business. Examples include natural disasters, legal proceedings, political scandals and terrorism.

The crisis planning team should define what constitutes a crisis, taking into account the nature of the institution, caucus or office it serves. The plan should clearly articulate the times in which the crisis response team should activate its plan. In those situations when it is unclear whether a situation qualifies as a "crisis," the crisis response team or a designated leader should determine whether to activate the plan.

Identify potential calamities and develop action plans. The team should identify scenarios that would require activation of the crisis plan. Individual action plans should be developed, giving step-by-step guidance on how to approach communications during and after each emergency.

The plans should include:
- A crisis response leader—This should be someone who has the authority to make decisions and commit resources. It could be a legislative leader or legislator, a legislative administrator or other qualified staffer. The leader is responsible for determining if a crisis response team should be deployed. The most qualified person to serve as the leader may be someone who is visible or it could be a "behind the scenes" person.
- A spokesperson—This should be one or two people trained in responding to media questions. They must be given continual guidance on what information can be released. Media inquiries should go directly to them to ensure a consistent message.

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Team members—Appoint team members for each action plan. They may include legislators, media relations, public information and internal communications staff, legal staff, chief of staff or key legislative aide, legislative administration, and security.

Distribute information for each response team member, including personal cell phone, pager and e-mail data, to other members. Team members should keep specific plan and team contact information with them, especially when away from the office.

A customized communications strategy—Develop specific plans for disseminating information to various forms of the media for each potential crisis.

A common message—Develop fact sheets and talking points for relaying information to the media and general public. Identify potential questions and develop appropriate answers.

A communications center—Designate a room available for press conferences, briefings and press relations. The room should have technical capabilities to support print and broadcast media. Its location should allow the crisis response team to work without interference.

Information for key constituencies—Make sure the appropriate people know about the communications procedures in advance. Train legislators and staff on handling crisis communications. Distribute general crisis response information to everyone in the legislature. The overall plan should be distributed to members of response teams. Once a plan has been activated, legislators and staff should be briefed on specific actions taken, where to direct media inquiries and how to handle questions if the spokesperson is unavailable.

A process for post-crisis evaluation—Shortly after a crisis, the planning and response teams should assess the strengths and weaknesses of the plan. Changes to the plan and the overall response to the crisis should be made based on feedback from the post-crisis meeting.

Practice, evaluate, revise. Practice makes perfect. Schedule periodic crisis exercises once or twice a year with a “mock crisis” and put the crisis communications plan into action.

Evaluate your plan. Were you able to respond in a timely and efficient manner? Were you able to keep key audiences apprised of the situation? What went wrong? Why? Then make the necessary changes so that when a real crisis strikes, you have already learned from your mistakes.

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**MAKE A PLAN**

There are four key steps in establishing overall crisis communications policy:

- Create a crisis planning team.
- Identify and define crisis situations.
- Identify potential crises and develop action plans.
- Practice, evaluate and revise the plan.

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