



HOW TO MANAGE A CRISIS

The ostrich approach to a calamity is popular but ruinous, says **Ben Willis**

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010 was memorable for many terrible reasons, but one episode that particularly stood out was when Tony Hayward, BP's chief executive at the time, remarked, "I would like my life back", as millions of gallons of crude oil gushed into the Gulf of Mexico.

It was a staggering remark that seemed to encapsulate BP's response to the whole event. The efforts of engineers to prevent the spill getting worse were awe-inspiring in their creativity and did eventually work. But Hayward's utterance was just one of a series of inappropriate comments by senior company executives, whose attempts either to deflect blame or downplay the severity of the disaster can only have made an already horrendous event worse in the public's eyes.

Crisis in its many different forms is almost certain to strike businesses or organisations at some stage. Whether it's an accident in which human life is threatened or lost, or something more innocuous, such as an adverse allegation, crisis management is a process that, like any other, can be handled poorly or well. Handled badly, it can threaten human life and ruin an organisation's reputation; handled well it can ensure the risk to the public and staff is minimised and even enhance an organisation's reputation.



Professional Manager caught up with PR expert Debbie Leven, whose company, The PR Coach, offers advice to businesses and companies on crisis management. She gave us some top tips on what to do and what not to do when it all kicks off.

Hit it head on

An essential measure in crisis management is planning, says Leven. Businesses and organisations will not be able to plan for every eventuality, she says, but basic preparation will prove invaluable when crisis strikes. "When the nasty stuff hits the fan, any business wants to avoid focusing on process-y type stuff rather than the incident," says Leven.

With this in mind, she suggests establishing a chain of command that

can take control of a situation when it arises. This should be backed up by a communications strategy designed not just to keep the public informed of what's going on, but also staff.

"Often that's not given the priority that's needed," Leven says, "because the biggest thing that tends to restrict people from being proactive in getting communication out there is the lack of clarity with what happened. Very often organisations can find themselves at the point where they want to issue a statement, but various people in the organisation aren't clear or agreed on what that statement should be."

Another key element of a crisis plan is a background fact document about the organisation. This would be issued to any journalists who get wind of a problem, to minimise the risk of misreporting in the early – possibly confused – stages of a developing crisis. As the old adage goes, a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.

Get your priorities right

But, should the worst happen, Leven says the invocation of the crisis plan

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● Further information

For more of Debbie Leven's insights, and more details on *The PR Coach*, visit www.prcoach.co.uk

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should be a secondary concern. "The priority should be the health, safety and security of the people involved," she says. "There is an immediate question you should ask: is anyone at risk?"

Alongside ensuring the right emergency services are involved where relevant, Leven says fact-finding is a crucial part of the early response to a situation. This is so that staff can be updated on what's going on and so that the organisation is prepared should the media get hold of the story.

If this happens, as well as the pre-prepared company background document, Leven advises issuing as quickly as possible a short, factual holding statement, containing brief details of what's happened. This could be accompanied by a Q&A-type document providing further information. The crisis plan should also have identified an individual within the response team who is the designated spokesperson.

Tell the truth

But the key factor in dealing with the press in times of crisis, Leven says, is honesty. "There can be a tendency among people to think it's all gone wrong, to bury your head," she says. "But the absolute given is that, if something does happen, and the press gets hold of it, they're not going to go away. So the best thing is to work with them, make yourself available and build a relationship so they come to you for the authoritative information."

This is vastly preferable to the alternative, which is that the shutters come down, forcing the journalist to find other ways into the story. "Once a journalist is onto a story and trying to find other angles and other people, there are a million and one ways in which the story can unravel in lots of different directions," Leven warns.

Learn the lessons

Once the worst of the crisis has passed, Leven recommends those involved undertake a debriefing process. "It's worth its weight in gold," she says. "It allows you to get a sense of whether your plan worked, and unpick all the elements and establish what worked and what didn't.

"A lot of organisations won't face a big issue, but, when it does happen, it can destroy an organisation. Even the minor incidents that come up – if you can learn from those, then that's really important."

WHAT I'VE LEARNED



KASHIF MANAN

The business controller of the AMEA region for TNT Express in the Netherlands learned the value of building coalitions on a CMI training course

It is important to build productive working relationships. These generally develop over time. The key is finding common ground with others and subsequently building rapport. This way it is easier to influence and drive change. It is important to do this with everyone you speak to, and build your working network, as this network of support will prove invaluable when you most need it.

Don't take things personally. Working in another country and dealing with multiple international regions, you realise that customs can vary greatly from the welcoming politeness generally expected in the UK. In other cultures, people can come across as very direct, regardless of what their opposite number may feel towards a particular matter. The key is not to take it personally, but to remain objective.

Prioritisation and discipline reap rewards. Sometimes it is the simple things that generate the greatest returns. I found this to be true of effective time management. Now, each task I am assigned is written down and prioritised accordingly. There is always the temptation to work on the more enjoyable tasks first. The key is to remain disciplined.

I have never found stubbornness to be productive. If you want to get your way with direct reports or senior management, you must be willing to listen to their views. Considering alternative points of view and finding a win-win situation is a far more effective approach.

Building coalitions is key to driving successful change. This was a key focus area when I studied for the CMI Leadership and Management qualification. It's one of those lessons that you may not value at first, but you quickly learn to appreciate its effectiveness in business.