AIA Best Practices:
Fire control: Managing crisis communications

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Summary

No matter the nature of the crisis, the key to emerging relatively unscathed is to take control of the narrative. Crisis management is about owning the story of what happened and why and what you are doing about it. It is also about avoiding a crisis by creating conditions that make it unlikely and stopping a problem before it escalates. Both require careful, thorough preparation.

Managing a crisis

Information

Crisis communication begins with factual information, but it has to be accurate, complete, and timely. Even the most benign mistake or confusion can give the impression that you don't really know what you are doing, or—worse still—are trying to hide something. What if you give the dimensions in usable square feet, the contractor in gross square feet, and your client in rentable? When you explain a building's height, are you including the below-grade levels? Is the person listed as the project manager when you began work three years ago no longer with your practice?

The relatively simple approach is a fact sheet, well worth having as an everyday marketing and public relations tool. Start it the day you sign the contract; review it weekly for updating and correction. Make one person responsible, preferably the person in charge of marketing. If you have progress photography, keep it in that same file. Include everything you might need to know in the event of a crisis.

Procedures

Create a crisis management plan, document it, and disseminate it amongst the staff. Brief everyone in your practice on crisis management procedures; remember, a crisis may come to light in a casual conversation on-site or a rumor overheard at a meeting. People need to learn how to deflect an inquiry, what to say on the phone if they happen to answer it, why it's vital to let the partners know if there seems to be an issue.

Your practice must speak with one voice, so designate a spokesperson and an alternate, both of whom should be senior members of your practice, preferably principals or partners. Whether you need to deal with the media or a client, the prominence of the spokesperson validates his or her comments and conveys respect for the inquirer's concerns. Your legal or public relations counsel should not speak for you—that signals real trouble—but they can provide valuable behind-the-scenes guidance.

Train the spokespeople to deal with the media; they must be knowledgeable, fluent, and unflappable. Identify others who will assist with communications in the event of a crisis: administrative and technical staff and anyone who routinely answers the phone. Start a crisis log at the first sign of trouble, so that everyone involved knows what's going on.

Getting the right word out

No matter what you do or how you do it, rumors are just about inevitable. You can deal with what you hear—it's what you may not be hearing that can blindside you. Transparency, with appropriate limits, really does work to your advantage. Communicate with the staff; be forthright in explaining the circumstances and what you are doing to address it. Encourage them to keep critical information strictly confidential. Like the game of "telephone," what one person hears emerges six people later as something entirely different. Provide your people with tactful ways of deflecting questions from outsiders without sounding defensive or evasive.

Reach out to your clients. It is far better to do so by phone or in person, rather than in a mass e-mail. You want to give them a chance to ask questions, and you need to read their reactions so you can respond effectively.

Dealing with the media

It used to be that "the media" were a comparatively limited group—newspapers, magazines and trade publications, and TV and radio broadcasts—guided by journalistic conventions and ethics. In the world of social media, on the other hand, anyone can say anything, unconstrained by confirmation by a reliable source or even common decency.

In the event of a real, physical crisis—something falls down, blows up, turns out to be defective—social media can be very useful for technical explanations. On YouTube, for instance, you can show what happened or what you are doing, rather than having to explain in technical language. Twitter's emphasis on brevity can be a plus if it is used for simple, frequent updates. Many architectural practices make excellent use of a Facebook page; but here, too, it is critical to speak with one voice and to limit uploads to an authorized individual. In general, though, responding to attacks on social media is a fool's errand. Let people vent; it makes them feel important, and it does you less harm than perpetuating a squabble does.

The professional media are another matter; dealing with them means accepting three key principles:

- The public interest is represented by the news media. This does not mean that they are unbiased; but their pursuit of information that concerns the public is legitimate.
- The object of the media is to retain and increase readership. Therefore, they publish stories they believe the public will want to read.
- If the media say you have a crisis, you do, unless and until it is proved otherwise.

The rules for managing the media are simple, but absolute.

When

Time is of the essence. All journalists work under the pressure of deadlines. Ask when the deadline is, and promise to respond in good time.

Give information as soon as you have it and can confirm it. If you delay, the media will tend to assume you've been massaging the facts.

Don't ask to see a story before it appears—in a crisis, there probably won't be time, and many journalists will consider it an insult to their professionalism. If you believe that certain aspects of a project or event are unusually complex and may be misconstrued by a reporter, offer to make yourself available for follow-up and clarification.

What

Don't refuse flat out to give information, unless your counsel has told you that you are legally constrained from doing so. If you don't have the answer, say so, explain why, or refer the reporter to someone who does. If you promise to call the reporter back, do so; if you still don't have the information, explain the reason for the delay.

Speculation and estimates are dangerous, because they tend to be reported and repeated as facts.

Don't falsify, slant, or color your answers, and only offer the facts. Reporters are trained to look for embellishments and spin; once they detect that in your language, they are likely to be skeptical of anything you say.

Accentuate the positive: track record, actions taken to minimize the crisis, plans for remediation, relief for those affected, quick professional response.

Be careful about assigning blame to another individual or company. Even if they are at fault, let someone else be the messenger, so you can avoid tainting any future relationships.

Never say "No comment."

How

Keep your cool. If a reporter keeps prodding or asks provocative questions, don't take the bait. Be cooperative, understanding, and helpful.

Don't argue with a reporter about the news value of a story. It is news if his editor says so.

Be tactful in rephrasing a reporter's question or correcting the inaccurate use of a technical term. The reporter may not be familiar with the subject matter; that doesn't mean he or she is intellectually challenged.

Who

It is preferable to allow a reporter to quote you by name. If you are not the designated spokesperson, you should not be speaking to the media in the first place. If you are, your willingness to be identified makes you more credible.

Get the reporter's name, publication, phone number, and e-mail address. If there is time before the deadline, contact the reporter to ask if he or she needs any further information. Keep track of who called and when. Do a quick search to make sure the person to whom you speak really does work for that publication.

Most reporters and editors are decent professionals with a job to do. However much you may wish they would leave you alone, they deserve your respect.

Caveat

The terms "off the record," "background," and "deep background" refer to the ways in which a reporter identifies, or conceals, a source. In theory, they are invoked to protect the source and to imply reliability. In practice, and especially in a crisis, it is unwise to assume a reporter will honor those terms. If you have an existing and positive relationship with a reporter or editor, you may be safe, but it is always risky to take confidentiality for granted.

Avoiding a crisis

Gathering information and establishing procedures, as described above, are essential to managing a crisis. But there are other measures, too, that help you avoid a crisis, while also building your reputation for ethical practice and good client relations.

Contracts

Take another look at the last few proposals you wrote and contracts you signed. Is there anything in them about marketing? Public relations? The assignment of credit, responsibility, and blame? Probably not. While you don't want to appear to be anticipating trouble by being overly self-protective, it's naïve to assume that others will have your best interests at heart.

The more straightforward the project and limited the number of players, the easier it is to make agreements with respect to communications with outsiders, including the media. In the best of all possible worlds, you and the owner might consider having a collaborative understanding about fact sheets, press releases, and marketing materials.

Discuss what your respective responsibilities will be in the event of a crisis, synchronize your responses, and share press lists and contacts. If you both have in-house public relations and marketing people, make sure they meet, get to know one another, and coordinate their procedures. The better the relationship from the start, the fewer problems you will have.

Large, complex projects tend to have large, complex organizational charts, which makes up-front understandings and agreements all the more vital.

Public agencies and departments in particular usually have written into their contracts explicit bans on communicating with the media:

You shall not issue or permit to be issued any press release, advertisement, or literature of any kind which refers to [XYZ Agency] or the services performed in connection with this Agreement, unless you first obtain the written approval of the Program Director. Such approval may be withheld if for any reason the Program Director

believes that the publication of such information would be harmful to the public interest or is in any way undesirable.

The problem isn't that you can't talk about the project overall or about the client—that's not unreasonable. The problem is that you can't talk or write about your services on the project, which means, essentially, that if there is a crisis, you can't explain why it isn't your crisis. Yes, in theory you can seek approval, but everyone is too busy in the midst of a crisis. The solution, according to several attorneys specializing in professional services and construction, is to negotiate an amended clause giving you the right, for instance, to explain exactly what your scope of work is and to include agreed-upon hard facts.

The buzz behind your back

Rumors are another gateway to a crisis. Because it is their very nature to percolate in the background, only emerging when the noise gets very loud, you can't always prevent them. But you can quash them if your relationships with your own staff and your clients are open and cordial; people need to be of a mind to believe you. If there are internal rumors—about cutbacks, a problem on a project, the departure of a senior member of the practice—talk to everyone, face-to-face if at all possible. Avoid the punitive parent or corporate executive tone: not "The partners wish to inform you…" but "I know you've been hearing… ." Give people the facts, invite questions, be forthright about what is and is not true. Ask people not to take their concerns out of the office, and encourage them to speak to you.

There can be a tendency, once the contract is signed and the project underway, for the senior people involved to step back and go on to other matters. Understandable, but don't lose touch with whoever shook your hand on the deal. Keep in touch routinely; ask how your client feels about the progress, the design, and other issues. Ask especially if those involved in the day-to-day work on the client's behalf are pleased with your people. Have there been any problems? Is there anything you should know about?

In the end, the fundamentals of crisis management are the same as those for practice management: do good work *and* be sure you are known for it; be innovative, problem-solving designers *and* exceptional managers of client relations— professionals of whom everyone thinks well.

Be prepared

Suppose, in a casual conversation, someone says of your practice, "Did you hear about ABC Architects? Someone said that their working drawings on the XYZ Project are a mess, and there are huge cost overruns."

Which response do you think you would hear:

- "Well, that's no surprise. John Doe was their best project manager, and he left last year."
- "Really? I know them and their work—that sounds very unlikely."

The first answer means you've already lost that battle, and you have a crisis on your hands. The second answer says that you've been telling your story your way, you own the narrative, and there probably isn't crisis after all.

About the contributor

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