



COMM in Times

By Teresa Valerio Parrot

I was never what you might call athletically gifted. For years, my family tried activity after activity in order to find my adventurous side, only to eventually come to the realization that I simply do not have one. Even now, I tend to apply unnecessary practicality to most tasks.

After two decades of lessons, I am still a risk-averse, green-slope skier. Scuba diving and surfing are less than enjoyable due to the creatures I can neither predict nor control. Parasailing, bungee jumping, and zip lining are wasted efforts as I focus on how well the knots are tied.



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U N I C A T I N G of C R I S I S

Recently, however, my family and I tried something new: whitewater rafting. Finally, an outdoor pastime that clicked. Eventually, I realized I felt that way because I had been undertaking a similar pursuit for years in my work: crisis communications on college and university campuses.

The parallels I see between the two can provide a practical guide for presidents as they evaluate their preparedness to communicate effectively and truthfully.

Gear Up

You can't safely start down the river without a helmet, paddle, and life vest. To successfully manage a crisis, you also need the right "gear." Inventory your resources and verify that you have what you need to protect your institution's image and reputation in times of crisis. Consider which staff members need to be particularly successful during these challenges, and any special skillsets they must master. Evaluate the communications supplies and tools needed, and identify the relationships you need to build before a crisis happens, to help ensure your message is heard. The time to build a team, partnerships, goodwill, and alliances isn't when you need them most.

The backbone of any crisis communications plan is a strong team of trusted administrators. The team must include your chief communicator and legal counsel. They are responsible for protecting the institution where it is most vulnerable during a crisis—in the court of law and the court of public opinion.

Legal counsel is an ideal partner for your chief communicator. They can ensure your messaging steers clear of legal difficulties and doesn't inadvertently increase your liability. Similarly, your communications counsel will ensure your messaging meets the expectations of your audiences.

From there, a list of experts to assemble includes those with expertise in media relations, the Family

Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and Title IX regulations. On the infrastructure side, campuses need the plans and technology necessary to conduct business remotely when the normal campus networks and equipment are not available.

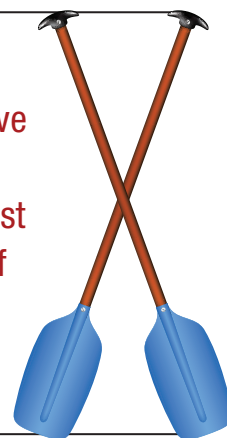
Specifically, some of the communications contingency functions to have in place include:

- Backing up critical files;
- Creating strategic redundancy around who can send messages to constituents, post to your website, and send messages via social media;
- Systems to track media and social media responses;
- A conference line available 24/7; and
- Liaisons to elected officials, community leaders, and/or local or national thought leaders.

Anticipate the Rapids Ahead

Your crisis communications plan should serve as a reminder of potential dangers—and what to do if you can't navigate around them. Develop a list of crises your campus could face, and prepare to address them at a moment's notice. Don't be afraid to plan for your

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greatest fears; doing so may keep you from failing to react properly in the crucible of an unfolding crisis.

Assign responsibilities for implementation and brief your board, cabinet, and campus leaders on their respective roles. Institutions that have failed in crisis communications often have individuals within their campus community who act with the best of intentions but are unaware of the campus plan and therefore undermine its effectiveness.

Don't become complacent in your planning. If you have a plan in place already, revisit and reassess it regularly and make the changes necessary to prepare your campus to address worst-case scenarios with truth, transparency, and relative calm. Keep your board, cabinet, legal counsel, and chief communications officer updated on potential crises. Roles cannot be filled if your leaders are blindsided by a situation you knew was brewing but didn't reveal in advance.

What might your institution face? The recurring list of natural and unnatural disasters, in no particular order, includes embezzlement, sexual harassment or assault, votes of no confidence, federal investigations, IT hacking, murder, suicide, loss of confidence by the public, hazing, alcohol abuse across campus, budget cuts, not meeting campaign goals, severe weather events, and athletic program infractions.

Not all items on this list will present themselves as an emergency or rise to the level of a crisis. Assess each situation independently—there is danger in over-communicating just as there is in under-communicating. Unnecessarily adding too much emotion to a situation could inadvertently inflate it to crisis levels. Sincerity serves as the ultimate litmus test for your response.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask for Help or Add a New Perspective

Presidents and chancellors who survive crises admit when they need help and ask for assistance from trusted sources. Effective campus leaders use their teams wisely and preserve their own strength in case conditions worsen.

Similarly, the ability to know when to ask for help—and to actually ask for it—is critical to protecting key lines of communication, institutional credibility, political capital, campus relationships, and scarce resources.

Sometimes, consultants and others who are not intimately connected to the campus or the crisis itself are well positioned to provide clarity and help make difficult decisions or execute difficult tasks. Third-party endorsers, advocates, and consultants can take pressure off of your team and allow you to focus on reacting to the terrain as it shifts beneath your feet.

In the throes of a crisis, it is tempting to shift your strategy in response to anecdotal feedback from board members, a small sampling of community

members, or comments posted to news articles. Don't allow yourself to succumb to the votes or opinions of a select few. Focus on what you know is the right thing to do and share that information with your constituencies.

Who can presidents ask for help?

- Members of your board with relevant skillsets or who hold credibility with other board members;
- Faculty, staff, or student leaders;
- Associations in which you hold membership;
- Elected officials;
- Respected community figures, including alumni; and
- Specific content experts.

Know Your Strengths and Build Off of Them

No one can be all things to all people. Presidents who assess a crisis and react in ways that align with what they do well—and acknowledging what they do not do well—will always be in a good position to succeed. For example, a president serving as the public face of an institution is ideal, but other times deferring to a board member or a subordinate might serve everyone's best interests. A crisis is not the time to make a situation revolve around you; a crisis response should keep the institution at the center.

Be brave enough to assess your strengths and weaknesses, and insist that your cabinet and board leadership do the same. Develop a plan that makes the most of your talents and takes full advantage of the skillsets of those around you.

What areas in particular should presidents evaluate?

- Media savvy, including ability to stay "on message";
- Relations with boards, the campus community, parents, and alumni;
- "Town/gown" relations;
- Ability to assess the proper level of emotion to include in communications; and
- Receiving and processing information.

Once you get the right gear on board and add the right people to the raft, your team should be well equipped to handle any crisis. Crisis and tragedy are always, for many reasons, very difficult to manage. But you can put yourself and your institution in the best position possible to negotiate rough water, no matter when it appears on the horizon. ■