The First 30 Minutes ...

As the New Year begins, people in schools all over America have a heavy heart, thinking of the Newtown, CT tragedy. This is a time for reflection regarding your school safety plan and your Crisis Communication plan. If you do not have a Crisis Communication Plan, it’s time to put one together.

What is done in the first 30 minutes of a crisis is crucial in determining people’s perceptions of the crisis and how it will be handled.

- Have the appropriate person handle the situation. An administrator (the principal or an assistant/designee) should take charge of the situation, implementing the crisis plan.
- Understand the circumstances; define the problems.
- Consider the options; act decisively to ensure the health and safety of students and staff and protection of district property.
- Communicate with staff; keep the news media informed.
- Update students periodically in their classrooms. Avoid having large group meetings.
- Send the central office a crisis assessment and information sheet that includes the following:
  - Brief description of crisis
  - Actions completed
  - What you project will happen in the next two hours
  - What resources you need
- Inform parents by letter, sent home with students at the end of the day, explaining what occurred and what has been done about it. If appropriate, e-mail could also be used to inform parents quickly.
- Keep the community informed. To allay fears and demonstrate competence in handling the situation, get accurate information out through the news media and other methods such as your key communicators group.

7 Common Mistakes in Crisis Management

Some of the important issues to be sure your crisis communication plan addresses:

**Mistake 1: Putting news media ahead of employees**

Be sure to communicate with the staff on site first, then staff at other schools/sites. Employees want and deserve news FIRST.

**Mistake 2: Lack of comprehensive media strategy**

Be sure your plan includes a designated spokesperson or persons and the development of key messages. Anticipate and meet needs of media and ensure key messages are understandable, honest and consistent. And, be sure to not ignore your local media – go to them first.

**Mistake 3: Ignoring the “Window of Opportunity”**

Be sure to respond quickly with factual messages that build trust and credibility. This is vital to addressing the issues. Once the “window” closes, it becomes difficult to change perceptions.

**Mistake 4: No clearly assigned roles**

Be sure to have an established Incident Command System and communication structure in place and rehearsed BEFORE the crisis occurs. Lack of role clarity guarantees confusion. Know the leaders and the doers in emergency management and response and in your district.

**Mistake 5: Limit communication due to litigation fears**

Be sure to communicate information carefully to ensure that your efforts are in good faith. Litigation usually follows adversity, but to limit communication due to fears of lawsuits does not help the school or the district.

**Mistake 6: No crisis plan**

Be sure to develop a plan. Practice it annually. Believing a crisis can’t happen is ignorant and arrogant. Having no plan can cripple an organization.

**Mistake 7: Untested crisis plan**

Be sure to test your plan in scenario training and to consult with others about the plan’s development and use. An untested crisis plan, developed in isolation, may be the biggest mistake of all.

**Source:** Rick Kaufman, APR, NSPRA member and past president Rick Kaufman, APR has developed crisis management experience on the frontlines. He served as the Crisis Response Team Leader during the Columbine High School tragedy, worked as a PIO Field Coordinator for FEMA during Hurricanes Katrina & Rita, and has become a National Crisis Communication and Management Trainer.

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**Resources to help formulate a plan . . .**

Leadership and proper management of any emergency event is crucial in order to communicate assurance to the stakeholders of your community.

**Crisis Management: A Leadership Challenge**

[CLICK HERE TO REVIEW]

**School Security and Emergency Preparedness Resource**

[CLICK HERE TO REVIEW]

**Tips for Staff in Response to Crisis Situations**

[CLICK HERE TO REVIEW]

**Social Media/Voice Notification Messages**

[CLICK HERE TO REVIEW]
On matters of school safety, your plans for understanding digital tools and crafting messages that matter will make all the difference!

SOME EXCERPTS FROM THIS INFORMATIVE REPORT:

PLAN, THEN TRAIN

Most schools have emergency response plans, but fewer school districts have formal crisis communications plans. The two should be separate documents but the logistics still must work hand-in-hand in a crisis.

In general, parents want to know two things after a high-profile school crisis:

→ What steps did you take to prevent an incident of crime and violence?
→ How well prepared were you to manage the incident that could not be prevented?

If you develop your messages and communications delivery around these principles, chances are your credibility and reputation will be at a much lower risk of being tarnished.