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Preparing for the inevitable: Construction crisis - by Susan Shelby and Peter Hillan

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Bodily harm and serious property damage are major risks when dealing with active construction projects, despite strict adherence to safety regulations. Construction firms designate time and resources to safety programs, equipment, and coordinators, but often fail to plan for how to handle a

crisis.

Crisis situations happen daily and can happen to any firm at any time. Many are preventable and recoverable if companies assess operational risks and make corrections, and prepare a crisis communications plan that determines roles, protocols, and how to control the narrative. It's important that companies view crisis communications planning as a necessary part of business, as well as a preparedness exercise for responding quickly and ethically in a challenging moment.

Before a Crisis

Prepare for an emergency by understanding your company's goals, assessing potential threats and occupational risks, and reviewing the preferred ways to communicate with key stakeholders. The company leadership should consider if it would need specialized consultants to support a crisis response, as well as identify the employees, customers, and suppliers who would be involved in outreach. Dedicate training time for scenarios most likely to occur (job site accidents, data breaches) to develop muscle memory with internal decision makers.

As part of a crisis communications plan, organize a crisis response team (CRT) with a designated crisis manager, a safety/OSHA coordinator, and a deputy crisis manager for administrative aspects. It is very helpful, ahead of a crisis, to develop relationships with a law firm, an IT forensics firm, and a communications coordinator to manage public relations, traditional and social media, and the website. A one-page document listing the CRT with contact information as well as brief instructions for handling the crisis should be created and kept accessible in the cloud and with laminated print versions for field staff.

A crisis is not the time to learn how to talk to stakeholders and the media, so identify potential spokespeople and arrange for media training.

During a Crisis

When an accident happens or a critical issue arises, it's time to activate the CRT and assess the situation. The goal is for the company to control its narrative when others are likely to create competing and ill-informed story lines. Companies should:

- Determine which trained spokesperson is best suited for the situation
- Inform employees and key partners
- Maintain active outreach as information arrives
- Instruct staff to refer calls to the appointed crisis communications coordinator and log all media inquiries.

The CRT should be prepared for television and radio crews to arrive at the job site and/or company headquarters. The designated spokesperson should be available and prepared, and the CRT can help to keep information accurate by distributing written statements and a fact sheet to media and

key stakeholders. It is important to provide as many facts as possible to maintain the company's visibility and control of the narrative. A polite and humble demeanor and sincere sympathy should be maintained.

Anything in writing, whether internal or external, should be appropriate for all stakeholders and media to see. The CRT should work with the company's law firm to protect and review privileged communications.

For an effective and timely response, the CRT should commit to responding to the media's immediate needs and give a detailed description of how the company will rectify the situation. Avoid speculation and provide answers to the following:

- What happened?
- Who or what is responsible?
- Why did it happen?
- Were there any deaths or injuries?
- What is the extent of the damage?
- Is there any danger of future damage or injuries?
- What is being done?
- When will it be over?
- Has it happened before?
- Were there any warning signs?

Today's world moves at the speed of a tweet and we live in a 24/7 news cycle, so leverage social media to gauge public reaction and disseminate updates. A designated member of the CRT should carefully monitor and participate in online conversations, staying accurate and brief and avoiding emoticons and abbreviations. Pause any planned posts that had been scheduled for social media.

After a Crisis

The crisis has passed, and everyone breathes a sign of relief. However, a recovery phase is a crucial chance to demonstrate a company's trustworthiness. The CRT should evaluate the effectiveness of its crisis communications plan by reviewing stakeholder feedback and media coverage to assess reputational damage and determine what steps need to be taken. It is often best to go "above and beyond" to reassure stakeholders. Hold an internal debriefing to adjust the plan as needed.

Even with safety precautions and good business practices, accidents happen. Companies would be wise to prepare now to prevent one from turning into a reputational crisis.

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