

Organizational Character

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Thomas Paine once said, “Character is much easier kept than recovered.” This dovetails with being prepared for an emergency. *Planning* to keep a reputation can help the organization avoid suffering a devastating loss. When the plan laid out in advance is to admit any faults and err on the side of honesty, the credibility of what is admitted will garner more respect than when an attempt to back-pedal is made.

Anticipation

How can management and decision makers control a crisis? The answer is simple. A *crisis* cannot be controlled, but the *consequences* of the crisis can be managed, mitigated and/or prevented. The first order of business is to know and understand the hazards that threaten the “business.” An effective organization must conduct a hazard vulnerability analysis that ranks threats. Dealing with threats against organizational character must be one of the threats considered.

Many programs consider the traditional natural and manmade hazards, but a class of hazard often overlooked is related to business continuity, especially public relations. Public relations incidents raise concerns, and if not handled properly, can elevate to the level of a crisis. If the crisis grows large enough, it can threaten the very existence of an organization.

Crisis Response Begins With an Admission

The most critical part of crisis response is admitting that you are, in fact, in the midst of a crisis. It is only at this point that the consequences of a crisis can be managed. Following a predetermined action plan and set of organizational morals can guide the response. A public information

campaign addressing the situation and describing what the organization is doing to rectify the problem is activated, and a trained public information officer addresses media and public concerns.

How To Be Seen As Responsive

- Be proactive in the approach, viewing the problem from the eyes of the consumer.
- Don’t try to utilize the science of the issue to prove a point.
- Don’t use the engineering aspect to explain that a repeat of the event isn’t possible or is incredibly remote.
- Don’t try to utilize the facts as your defense.
- Remember that the public does not want to hear about the science, the engineering – or, at times, even the facts. The public wants to hear that you understand *their* concerns and that the organization sees the issue from *their* perspective.

Managing and Maintaining Character

Management of character is easy when your organization has chosen in advance to do the right thing. “First, state clearly that you do *not* know all the facts. Then state the facts that you *do* know,” Warren Buffet once said. “One’s objective should be to get it right, get it quick, get it out, and get it over. You see, your problem won’t improve with age.”

Preparing for a crisis allows the “if-then” thought process to occur. Decisions can be made in advance, not under duress.

Preparing to have an open and honest response to a public relations crisis in advance of an onslaught of reporters and public scrutiny (when your legal counsel is attempting to persuade you to

limit your liability exposure) will prevent senior management from being led astray.

Waiting until the disaster occurs puts forces upon decision makers that may change their perception of reality. “*Groupthink* is a mode of thinking within a cohesive group that is engaged in by people who so strongly seek consensus that there is no realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action, stated Michael C. LeMay in *Public Administration: Clashing Values in the Administration of Public Policy*. “A drive for consensus at all cost completely suppresses dissent.”

Crisis easily can become a groupthink phenomenon. With prior planning and decision making, you can avoid having your values go sideways during the crisis. Follow the advice of Warren Buffet by engaging in public transparency that will save the organization time as well as its reputation. It’s easy when the direction has already been established from the executive level to “do the right thing.”

Conclusion

All aspects of a successful emergency response are contingent upon planning. A successful outcome is achieved by doing the right thing at all turns, not solely attempting to protect the organization from legal liability. Organizational character can be maintained if advanced planning and training ensures that all parties understand the organization’s policy is to be open and honest. This will maintain the integrity of the organization, ensuring that organizational character is valued and protected.

