Common Mistakes in Crisis Management

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. His list of “7 Common Mistakes in Crisis Management” highlight 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 and practice it annually. Believing a crisis can't happen is ignorant and arrogant. Having no plan can result in crippling damage to 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.

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