

Responding to a Crisis

ARE YOU PREPARED ENOUGH IN THE EVENT OF A CRISIS?

by Lani Jordan

Note: The following scenario is hypothetical and intended to illustrate how an organization might roll out its communication response in the event of a crisis.



Lani Jordan

It's 3:30 on a quiet Friday afternoon before a long, late-summer holiday weekend. As elevator owner/manager, you're wrapping up some paperwork and hoping to make your weekend exit an hour early. While much of your staff has taken the afternoon off, a few remain in the office and shop. Three other employees are scheduled to handle the last few loads of corn

arriving from area producers emptying their on-farm storage in anticipation of harvest.

Suddenly you hear a rumble. Rushing to the window, you see corn flowing from your three-year-old 140,000-bushel steel grain storage tank, one side of which has buckled and partially collapsed. Yelling to the remaining office staff to call for emergency responders, you join the rest of your skeleton crew in racing to the site, where you see that the semi-trailer that had been waiting to unload is partially engulfed, and one of your elevator employees is scrambling to find the driver.

Third in Four-Part Series

Within minutes, staff and local responders are heading to the collapse to secure the area and start rescue and recovery operations.

What Now?

Fortunately, you are among the prepared – a company that has a crisis communication plan and knows such events are real possibilities even within the best-run organizations. Fifty-nine percent of business decision-makers say they've experienced a crisis at their current or pre-

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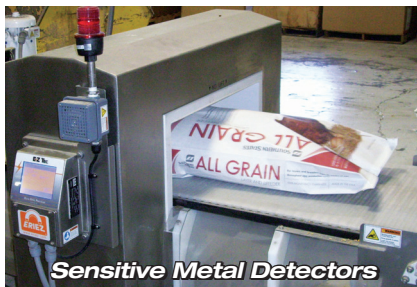
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vious companies, according to a report from ODM Group. Of those surveyed, 79% believe they could have one in the next year. But even though most see trouble on the horizon, just 54% have a plan. You're on the right side of that ratio and, better still, your leadership team recently reviewed and updated your plan, and they practiced it less than a year ago.

Running to your office, you pull out your plan and begin notifying your crisis team members. Although it's a holiday weekend, many already have learned about the collapse, and their vehicles are pulling up onsite. You know others are out of town, so you move down the list and call your backups. You also contact those you've listed as resources to ►

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supplement your staff in a crisis – your law firm and the communications consultant who helped develop your plan.

Others on your team are making sure any required regulatory notifications have been made and are calling contractors to prepare for grain removal and other work in the incident's aftermath. You instruct an office staff member to manage the phones, which are starting to ring; they will record contact information, so you can respond quickly to any critical calls.

You head outside where you see that the scene has been secured. You confer with the incident commander and learn that the grain truck's driver has been found and quickly freed from his cab. Unconscious but breathing, he's being treated by EMS responders and is about to be transported to the hospital. You also learn that two of your employees are unaccounted for. Search and rescue efforts continue with caution, until the integrity of the damaged bin and any other risks are assessed.

Local residents are gathering just outside the secure area. Your office manager informs you that members of the media

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are calling and some are on their way, as are the families of the two missing employees.

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What Do You Say?

It's now been 45 minutes since the bin collapse. Your physical response is well underway, and because you have a crisis communication plan, you are prepared with standby statements reflecting

your company's commitment to its employees that become the foundation of your messages for this incident. You are:

- Putting concern at the forefront for the injured driver, your missing employees and their families, your other employees, and the community.

- Demonstrating action and leadership in managing the response, recovery, and other needs and supporting your words with facts.

- Avoiding speculation as to the cause of the collapse and refusing to comment on rumors.

- Emphasizing your commitment to safety in all you do. You can say this, because you are certain your record supports it.

- Cooperating with responders and regulators.

- Committing to a thorough investigation to determine cause of the collapse and taking any steps needed to prevent future such incidents.

Your first action is to talk to the family members of the missing employees who have arrived onsite. You assign your human resources leader or another leadership team member to support them. You make sure they have a comfortable place to wait, if they need it, and commit to providing regular updates.

You then update your employees who are onsite and send a similar message by email to those who have left for the weekend. As you wrap up, you tell them it's fine to share this information with family and friends but to avoid speculation. You also review the company's media and social media policies with them, reminding employees to direct all media contact to you or the communication resource and that they cannot speak on behalf of the company through their social media accounts.

Updating the Media

Reporters now are gathering onsite, as well as calling and emailing for updates. You consult with the incident commander and determine that the two of you will hold a joint briefing at 5:30 p.m. This will be limited to 10 minutes, and you will take only a few questions. Your communications leader will provide those who have called or messaged with a written statement incorporating a factual overview of events and your messages. You promise additional updates on an hourly basis or as ►



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new information becomes available.

Because you are prepared, the media briefing goes well. Some television stations broadcast live during their evening news shows from the secure area you've designated for media.

You also post your statement to your website and social media. Since learning of the collapse, your communication resource has been monitoring media and social media and recently discovered a video of the collapse. It was posted to Facebook by a neighbor who had been taking footage of her grandchildren in her back yard, which has a direct view of the bin. It's going viral and getting picked up by media broadcasts and websites, so you will continue to monitor and respond proactively to each post or report as warranted.

You also discover rumors are circulating about problems with the storage bin in recent weeks. To those who raise this, you reiterate your commitment to focusing on the injured driver and missing employees and will not speculate on the cause until the investigation is complete.

In the meantime, other members of your team are communicating with

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your insurers, regulators, and the town's mayor to keep them informed and identify any needs. You make sure everyone has the current core messages and keeps information consistent while addressing the specific concerns of each audience.

By early evening there is a piece of good news. One of the two missing employees has turned up safe. Unknown to you, his coworkers, or his family, he'd left the elevator about 15 minutes before the collapse hoping to beat traffic to a friend's northern cabin. He learned about the event only when he stopped

to check his Facebook feed and called in. You talk to his ecstatic family and then update your communication, sharing it with all of your audiences. In your statement, you express gratitude that he was not involved. (You'll deal with his unauthorized absence later!)

Search and rescue efforts continue, and at 8 p.m., there is more news. The missing employee has been located under the semitrailer, where he was pushed by the impact of the moving grain. He is unconscious and appears badly injured. Responders quickly extract him from beneath the truck, and he is transported swiftly to an area hospital for treatment, followed by his family members.

Your team quickly revises your messages and again provides updates to all of your audiences, including those following your website and social media. You conduct a final media briefing, and reporters begin to disperse with a few television stations remaining to broadcast live on their nightly news shows.

Feeling well-prepared and confident in your messages, you agree to a few brief live interviews. Responders begin leaving, with plans in place for overnight security, until investigation and cleanup commence.

Finally, well after midnight, you head home after one of the most stressful days of your career.

The Morning After

Because you have a thorough plan, you understand that a crisis isn't over when the responders depart. Early Saturday, you and your team reconvene to assess the incident's status, review how things went, and create a to-do list. There will be numerous conversations and visits with investigators, regulators, and insurers. You recognize that there also may be days, weeks, and even months of communication, as well as relationship rebuilding.

With the immediate crisis behind you, your team agrees that communication to area farmers who are your customers is essential. An email is drafted incorporating your core messages and noting that while meeting producer needs during harvest is the priority, it likely will be several days until specifics are available, and you will provide updates. This information also is posted to your website.

You are receiving media calls for ►



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Seven Tips for Crisis Preparedness

- Have a crisis response team in place
- Plan and drill
- Pick your spokespeople in advance
- Know your key messages
- Know your audiences
- Be able to have a statement ready in 20 minutes
- Monitor media and social media

updates on the injured truck driver and your employees, as well as any thoughts on the cause of the collapse and implications for storage during the upcoming harvest. As is appropriate, you refer requests for medical information to the area hospital, which is working with the families. You also reinforce your message that you will not speculate on a cause, and that a thorough investigation is underway and you provide the same information on elevator status you gave your

Knowing that it's essential to recognize and restore relationships after a crisis, later that week, you place an advertisement in your local newspaper thanking local emergency crews for their help finding and rescuing the injured.

customers. You plan to visit the two injured people in the hospital.

All of your employees will return following the holiday weekend. You schedule a meeting for first thing Tuesday to provide an update, thank those who acted as first responders, and most of all, allow them to talk. You'll make employee assistance counseling available for those who want it.

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jured. You also thank the community for its support and reiterate your commitment to operating a safe business. You also make a contribution to the local volunteer rescue squad.

Six months later, you look back. The investigation is wrapping up. Your employee is back to work, as is the grain truck driver. You successfully served your customers' harvest needs. Your business is intact, and you're replacing the storage bin. And while you would never wish such an event on any business, you're grateful that you and your team had the plan and the people in place to respond successfully in a time of crisis.

Lani Jordan is principal of Lani Jordan Strategic Communication (www.lanijordan.com and lani@lanijordan.com) specializing in strategic communication planning, executive communication, crisis communication, and issues management that help businesses and organizations succeed.

For more than three decades, she led corporate communication, including leadership of crisis communication planning and execution, for CHS Inc., the largest U.S. cooperative and a diverse global business with more than 500 grain, fertilizer, grain processing, and energy locations.

In the final installment of this series, in the November/December 2017 issue of Grain Journal, Jordan shares some of the lessons she's learned from responding to and observing hundreds of crises. Listen to her recent webinar on the topic at www.grainnet.com/crisis.

Crisis Communication Webinar

To view Lani Jordan's May 9 webinar "Crisis Communication...Are You Ready?" visit:

www.grainnet.com/crisis