

# Crisis Management

Crises come slowly or suddenly, igniting adrenaline. Crises make hard learning experiences. What have you learned from crises — and what would you do differently, with the refreshing virtue of 20/20 hindsight, a specialty of journalism?

## Burl Osborne

The best thing in a crisis, particularly when it is very loud and noisy, is to seek calm in reverse magnitude of the noise. So the louder the noise, the calmer we ought to be. And the more we should step back and say, “Wait a minute, let’s make sure we know what we are doing before we go ahead.”

## Nancy Maynard

You have to figure out in a crisis who is in the best position to help preserve the organization. Bring that person into your trust, totally. Then share the information. Make the trusted group integral to the decision-making process.

I am a big believer in Stephen Covey’s “7 Habits of Highly Effective People.” He has a device in his thinking called the emotional bank account. What it means is that every action that you take is either a deposit or a withdrawal of trust.

You make as many deposits as possible and as few withdrawals as necessary. And you apologize immediately for any withdrawal. In a crisis, trustworthiness of leadership is everything.

## Norman Pearlstine

Six months after I became managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, I learned that one of its star market columnists, Foster Winans, was selling advance notice of what his columns would say. We determined quickly that the reputation of the *Journal* depended more on how we covered this crisis than on anything Foster had done. We put a dozen people on the story and published a front-page analysis of the scandal in a matter of days. The day the story ran, one of the senior business people at the *Journal* stormed into my office and screamed at me: “How dare you wash the *Journal*’s linen in public.” He couldn’t understand how much our reputation would have been damaged had we

sat on the story. I threw him out of my office.

I have been fortunate at Time Inc. to have business-side colleagues who understand the importance of editorial independence and acknowledge that Time Inc.'s publications must cover our parent, AOL Time Warner, as aggressively as we cover any other company.

### Lou Boccardi

(Former AP chief) Wes Gallagher had a knack for getting to the point.

Sometimes when you're confronted with a problem or crisis of some kind, you get bottled up in the beginning of it, the next step of it. ...

He had a knack of saying, "Look when this is over, this is where we need to be. ... Now we figure out how we get there."

## Create an environment in which people are willing to argue with you, to tell you things that may be bad news.

My style is to want to gather as much information as I can. I'm in that sense a pack-rat. If there is a crisis, I want to know about the corners and the craters. That puts my mind in a frame where I feel, well, I can deal with it.



What really helps you manage in big crises, and in the everyday things that you confront, is to create an environment in which people are willing to argue with you, to tell you things that may be bad news, to tell you things that maybe they might think you don't want to hear.

On election night 2000, after a night of back and forth and struggle, (with) all of the networks declaring that it's over and Bush has won, the phone starts to ring. I was around the general desk as that started to happen. Newspaper editors across the country, right across the time zones, were screaming at us, "Where is mine? My readers, those who've stayed up, are going to bed with one thing and I'm going to give them a 'Nobody Knows' or 'Narrow Toss-up' sort of a headline?"

It took extraordinary courage for the AP people who made that decision, [not to make a premature call on election night]. The people who made that decision basically were the people in our Washington Bureau who were doing the election. They knew what AP wanted of them — if you want to personalize it, what Lou wanted of them — was their best judgment. And we had a couple of people there who looked at what the Florida numbers were saying and they said, "Our friends at the networks notwithstanding, we can't do it. It is just not there."

You can't create that on the edge of a crisis. It's not some miraculous force that takes hold of you that instant if you haven't bred in that sense of what will we do when this issue arises.

We felt good that we hadn't made that call, hadn't made that jump, but not particularly surprised. This is what we do. The numbers didn't add up.

## Ben Bradlee

Janet Cooke: There were a lot of lessons there. People underneath have got to be sure and comfortable in expressing their doubts.

That case was so sad, because Janet Cooke was a really interesting writer and could have been a great talent.

The first thing we did was to call up [and return the Pulitzer Prize].

So you have to do that. Just as if you take a torpedo in a destroyer, you have to limit the damage. Find out what the damage is, then limit it. And what we decided was to test this ombudsman concept and see if it was as good as we thought it was. We decided to give a wise and experienced person carte blanche to write anything he wanted about our role in this. All the journalists were encouraged to talk to him, and no one edited it.

He did a hell of a job. It took him three days to do (it). This is Bill Green, who was not really a professional journalist; he had worked for a small paper, but he was vice president of Duke University. His only instructions were, let nothing ever be revealed about this case that's not in your story, ever, ever, ever. And he did it.

## Tom Johnson

We're under deadline pressures in newspapers, radio, TV, even newsmagazines. Government leaders are under great pressure. Business is under great pressure. But I would stop. That's the time to really close the door and think — to at least wait if you can until the next day so that you are fresh. Frequently, the pressure is so great to make the call, we lose sight of good judgment. And you're being pressured by some very good people, at times, to go with a story that's supposed to be on the air on this show at 8 o'clock. If you have any doubts about it, [hold it]. That was my big regret out of Operation Tailwind, that I didn't delay it at least a week and take a much much harder look at it. My gut told me to do that. But my very most trusted people were telling me it was ready to go.



I've always found that it's helpful to have a few wise and trusted people to whom you can turn to for information and advice. They are frequently people outside the profession with whom I can talk and get really candid advice. They have included a number of colleagues from past experiences of mine. In a crisis, it is important to know that you are getting good information. Your judgment is no better than your information.

So if it is really hitting the fan, some gigantic crisis in your own company ... getting the facts right and knowing what you're dealing with is critical before you start taking steps. Have some folks around you who are tough enough, independent enough, to

look you in the eye and say, you're wrong about that.

I worry that too many people get into CEO positions and they intimidate those around them, so people aren't willing to come through the door and say, "You've got that wrong. You need to rethink it." And I honestly believe more of those are needed. They're not naysayers. They are independent executives and staffers who can save you and the organization sometimes from making some very big [mistakes].

### **Alberto Ibargiñen**

As a publisher, you've always got to stay accessible to staff, letting nobody mistake that our job is to tell the story completely, fully, honestly, neutrally. It may cause problems. It may cause discomfort, but we will tell the story and the [company] is behind the story; constantly reinforcing the fact that the executive editor is in charge of the story.



During the Elián González controversy, it was a very tense time in Miami. People were unable to talk to each other in a cool and rational way. You had neighborhoods and reporters and even husbands and wives coming from different backgrounds, reacting to this story in radically different ways. It was very difficult to find common ground.

So, in a story like that it is critical that you tell the story neutrally and that you take out the hot words. Our job was to take out a lot of emotion, take out a lot of heat, because this was added by the readers themselves.

### **Steve Isenberg**

I'm for facing down a crisis. That doesn't mean that each and every hard problem has to be talked about every single minute of every single day, but that the people who are in charge really have to stare in the face of the situation.

When they talk about it, they ought to be honest and direct about it. Even though human nature and organizational behavior often want those people to avert their eyes, you've got to get people to look at it and deal with it. I think that requires a really full, honest understanding of the people at the top.

Let the people who are trying to guide the ship know it's really hard. You've got to be optimistic, but it can't be cheap. It can't be rhetorical. What is needed is a tone of honesty and candor that leads you to purposefulness so that you're not drowning in the small things. You say, what are the two or three most important things that we've got to do? They will guide us through this.

### **William Hearst III**

(Newspaper editor) Frank McCullough's rule for crises is, "If you need to manage in a crisis, you've already screwed up." Your goal as a manager was to make yourself dispensable in a crisis, because you've put all the pieces in place.



# In a crisis you have to summon up a calm from within. ... Crises can reveal who's got the right stuff.

An old photographer told me, never rush when you're in a hurry. So in a crisis you have to summon up a calm from within. Another thing that I have found in crises is that you will be surprised who weathers the storm well and who falls apart. The up-and-coming star is suddenly absent with medical problems. And someone you've never really paid attention to is an absolute rock. And so crises can reveal who's got the right stuff.

## Tim McGuire

A few years ago, the *Star Tribune* erroneously printed the photo of a candidate the day of election with an unrelated story. The candidate, as Murphy would have it, lost. He certainly felt that was our fault. The great lesson I learned from that was I didn't move quickly enough, assertively enough.

I didn't get out front with an apology. I should have, not because it was politically smart, but because it would have been morally right.

## Burl Osborne

In my judgment, where a human life is at stake, our citizenship responsibility trumps our role as a newsperson. On the other hand, I think that if we allow ourselves to be used as tools, or agents of law enforcement, then as the Southern Baptists say, "We have done quit preaching and gone to meddling." We should not be doing that.

## Ben Bradlee

Around the election of '72, there was a lot of very personal and pointed criticism at me, at Kay (Graham), at the paper itself. People who were ... plainly lying.

My children didn't think that the nightly news was as much fun as I did, and they said, "Why are they so mad at you?" But I must have been born with a thick heart. It never really disturbed me as long as I kept feeling that we were right.



The best damage control is before the fact. Be sure that you spot the pitfall. But I remember I fired some poor copy boy who gave two marijuana cigarettes to somebody, gave it, didn't sell it. I'm not very proud of that decision. I think I ... played to the gallery.

The idea that you live anything like a mistake-free life as an editor of a newspaper is ridiculous.

But you have to make a gazillion decisions, and you can't ponder all of them, because it's going to back up the whole system.

## Matt Storin

We had a story about the murders of the two Dartmouth professors, which was a bum story. And we did a front-page retraction.

In the journalism world, oh my God, how embarrassing. (We) had to do a retraction. The public thought it was great. That's a big paper to do something like that. That's the honest thing. It was personally embarrassing to me. I put my name on the damn thing.

You've got to uphold those principles. When the going gets tough, [strong leaders] don't wiggle on the things that they've been expounding.

Even in the most cantankerous newsrooms in America, [staffers] want to be heard, but ultimately they want someone else to make the decision. That's what you're being paid for.



(After journalistic crisis) there is an interesting dichotomy in the response of the public. Journalists are embarrassed by something. They rush to say: not me, not my paper, not my journalists, not my column. I would never do this. I'm not part of that. This is reprehensible.

The public is used to seeing presidents, bishops, cardinals maybe, ministers, rabbis, lawyers, for sure, caught in scandals of all kinds. Why would they think that journalists would be any different? All of these professions hold themselves up to the higher standards. But there are still individuals within there that are going to fail.