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## Commentary

### Crisis Communication 101: Get the information right!

By Al Rickard, CAE, president, Assn Vision, Chantilly VA

*Question:* What's worse than having a major crisis hit your organization?

**Answer:** Allowing false information to be reported by the media.

Just ask the leaders of the International Coal Group, who were caught in a public relations disaster in early January when it was reported incorrectly that 12 of 13 miners in West Virginia survived being trapped in a mine for days after an underground explosion; in fact, all but one had perished.



Rickard

This unfortunate event offers some lessons on crisis communication that all organizations should heed:

- **Establish in advance a system of communication that clearly identifies the one spokesman who will deliver information to the media.** Make sure the media know who this person is and ask the media not to report what they hear until they can confirm it with the spokesperson. In the case of the mining accident, apparently a rescuer initially reported via cell phone that the miners had survived, and word spread quickly among the families. The governor of West Virginia then announced the news, but without the knowledge and approval of the mining company. Tighter controls would have avoided this.
- **Correct any inaccuracies immediately.** The heartbreak of the mining disaster was that families believed for three hours that their loved ones were alive until news came that they had died. The mining company CEO later explained that the company was trying to determine the status of the miners during a hectic rescue operation during that three-hour period before making an announcement. However, as soon as it was clear that a pre-emptive announcement had been made without complete information, the company should have at least notified families and the media that the information was not confirmed.
- **Apologize for any mistakes.** In the press conference when the mining company CEO announced the miners had died, he expressed regret for the earlier report and heartfelt sympathy for families of the victims, as he should have. He explained how the miscommunication occurred. But he never apologized for the misinformation. While it was apparently delivered by a rescuer at the scene (not by his company), he was still responsible for controlling the flow of information and making sure the media knew who to go to for confirmation. The media and the public are usually willing to forgive public officials when they make a sincere apology. But the mining company's reputation suffered as a result of this incident.

Do journalists bear some responsibility for the incorrect report? Yes.

Washington *Post* media writer Howard Kurtz explained, "Sure, the bum information came from West Virginia's governor, and the coal company shamefully refused to correct the record for hours. But the fault lies with the journalists for not instinctively understanding that early, fragmentary information in times of crisis is often wrong. You don't broadcast or publish until it's absolutely nailed down, or at least you hedge the report six ways to Sunday. This was, quite simply, a media debacle, born of news organizations' feverish need to breathlessly report each development 30 seconds ahead of their competitors."

Other journalists were not as contrite, citing the governor as a credible source and noting the numerous news reports about miners surviving. But newsrooms across the nation re-examined their policies on sourcing information in crisis situations in the wake of the incident.

In the end, most observers agreed that an honest mistake was made and that responsibility for the misinformation was shared among several individuals and organizations involved. But proper planning and on-site crisis communication management can help avoid mistakes in the first place.

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