



A Crisis Communications Plan

by Martha Whitman

It happened: a sudden crisis has landed on the board's doorstep. While each crisis has its particular flavor, many elements will be universal. The situation can quickly spin out of control. There will be pressure to act immediately, and upset or concerned stakeholders will want to be heard.

In a crisis (real or perceived), the board's duty extends beyond safeguarding the co-op to ensuring communication is happening at all levels. Communication during crisis events should maintain, if not enhance, transparency. Acting quickly and smartly will be key to slowing down the inevitable reactionary responses to a crisis. But acting under pressure and emotion practically guarantees that mistakes will happen. The trick is to lessen potential mistakes and to demonstrate good faith on

the part of the co-op. An established crisis communication plan will be important for achieving the optimal outcome. While having a plan won't eliminate a crisis, it will aid in the repair. The board's biggest contribution is making sure a crisis communication plan exists and knowing its role within this plan.

When the call comes in and the board is made aware of a crisis, three questions must be answered: Who is going to speak for the co-op? What other questions need to be answered? How will the co-op's message be communicated?

Speaking with one voice will never be more critical than during a time of crisis. The nature of the crisis will determine the co-op's spokesperson. Whether it's the general manager or board chair, the full board must be in the loop. That means board members must agree on how

they will communicate with one another. They should be prepared to meet frequently and with short notice. While tempting, e-mailing is not a good option for communicating anything beyond the barest of facts. It's impossible to accurately gauge tone in electronic communications, and they're not secure. Don't use e-mail or text messages for important dialogue, especially during a crisis situation.

At your first emergency meeting, you'll build agreement about how the board will or won't be involved in the crisis. Start by reviewing what your board policies already say you'll do. Most co-ops have a policy directing the board chair to be the board spokesperson, and there's probably a policy that acknowledges a chain of command, which means the board will not do an end-run around the general manager.

This article is excerpted from Issue #13 of the [LEADer](#) (Leadership Education and Development newsletter), published in fall 2011. The topic of this issue was dealing with a crisis situation with other articles about preparing for a crisis, finding a graceful exit to a conflict, and a case study on a crisis situation. The study guide features links to articles about actual crises faced by two co-ops and a series of discussion questions for the board to help you be better prepared. Find the [full issue here](#).

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If the crisis is related to a personnel matter, you can be sure some members and staff will expect the board to step in and “fix” the problem. More than ever, this is where you want to follow your policies. They are there to keep you grounded and will save you untold heartache down the road.

At your emergency meetings, ask additional questions: What do we know? What are the concerns of our stakeholders? What will people need and want to know?

When you’ve answered these questions, you’ll be better able to determine what actions to take. Based on those actions, identify what messages need to be conveyed and how you’ll reach your stakeholders. If the general public is a stakeholder, consider press releases, postings to

Facebook, and media interviews. If it’s more of a member issue, you’ll want to consider forums, Facebook, store flyers, and newsletter articles. An internal crisis involving mostly staff may very well not involve the board, but the GM must be available and forthcoming to the workers. The board’s responsibility in a staff crisis is to understand the issue and to verify that the general manager is following policy.

When a crisis erupts, there is little time to get your message out first, yet that is your goal. The first message carries more weight than all messages that come after, and being first will lessen the rumors and bias against you. At the same time, your message must be accurate and credible. Initially, you may not know a lot, and it’s better to

say less than more. But once you do have solid information, be honest and open. Actions speak louder than words, and people will be watching how the board and management handle the crisis. Walk the talk of your co-op’s values.

Act with integrity, even though that won’t necessarily eliminate upset and hard feelings. Let your governance structure and crisis communication plan guide you.

The key when managing a crisis is to start soon and focus on communications.