

»» **How to manage a crisis
without falling into one?**

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Intense fear, a sensation of choking, palpitations and a rapid pulse are symptoms of a panic attack. It happens when unexpected news or dangerous situations cause an adrenaline rush in the blood torrent and trigger an emergency signal that takes control over the body.

Psychologists explain that in an emergency situation, the right hemisphere of the brain, which is more emotional and less logical than the left hemisphere, takes control of the situation. Conversely, sequential, organized, orderly and logical activities depend on the left hemisphere, which remains more passive in the exact same situation. This is why during an emergency situation, people intellectually well prepared are unable to react, or make mistakes that complicate the matter even further.

This explains why it is so important to prepare executives to manage a crisis, without falling into one. It is an important challenge because we all are human and we all have fears. However, it is fundamental to recognize what kind of personality the Board of Directors has, in order to know how to deal with each different personality during a crisis.



HUMAN BEHAVIOR DURING A CRISIS

When it comes to risk management, the human factor is key to define what a company will or will not do when facing a crisis situation. The management team takes the decisions during the crisis, and depending on the personalities of each one of them, the situation can improve or get worse.

Each person reacts differently when confronted to danger, according to the human behavior in emergency situations report ("*Conducta humana ante situaciones de emergencia*"), conducted by the Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene at Work. According to the report, there are at least three main types of personalities: hysterical, depressive and obsessive. We will now analyze what are the characteristics of each personality, and observe how they can have an impact when dealing with a corporate risk situation.

- **Hysterical:** a person with a boisterous and exaggerate behavior. They can have a negative impact, as they can transmit their hysteria to others. The risk during a crisis in this case is that hysterical people transmit the information rapidly but inaccurately, distracting attention from the problem and raising unnecessary alerts. Moreover, both their overactive attitude and the message they convey about the company at an internal and external level are dangerous.
- **Depressive:** they have a demoralizing and pessimistic behavior that also affects those around them. They are characterized by slow movements, apathetic behavior and little gesticulation. With this in mind, the risk in this case is that information will flow slowly, due to the doubts and personality of depressive people. The correct information is neither available nor complete; therefore it is more difficult to properly analyze the situation. As a result, the company cannot decide correctly how to act during each step of the conflict.
- **Obsessive:** people with fixed and indisputable ideas. Their negative impact on crisis situations depends on how they expose their ideas (in an extremely positive or negative way). However, they can carry out evacuation tasks which require organizational skills. People with this personality type will transmit information according to their own perception of the situation. As a consequence, they can minimize or exaggerate a situation, sharing only their point of view with the rest of the group and not giving complete information. Having a biased analysis of the situation makes more difficult for the management team to cover all facets of the problem.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT: PRINCIPLES OF EMERGENCY PSYCHOLOGY THAT CAN BE APPLIED TO CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Emergency psychology is not something new: its origins date back to the well-known Sigmund Freud. However, Lindermann is considered a pioneer of this science. In 1944, he conducted a study about the survivors of a fire occurred at a nightclub in Boston, and their families.

This branch of psychology aims to study the different changes and reactions that people experience during a dangerous situation. It does not matter if this situation is provoked by natural causes, or if it is, intentionally or unintentionally, man-made.

This analysis helps to predict how each person is going to react and explains what to do in order to change or shape these reactions. What is more important: the analysis also helps to prepare the rescue teams, the professionals and the community. All of them are increasingly confronted to several types of potential dangerous situations, from an incident to a terrorist attack.

If we follow the guide made by the Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene at Work, we will observe that the communications recommendations for an emergency situation are compatible with the recommendations regarding the management of communication during a corporate crisis.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY GUIDE NTP35

STEPS TO TAKE WHEN COMMUNICATING DURING A CRISIS

INFORMATION

During an emergency, the interruption or absence of information is one of the main causes of chaos. Without information, cooperation becomes difficult. It will be used to have an influence, motivating, persuading and/or controlling the status of the emergency.

In a crisis, the main challenge is to lead the process and give the impression that the company knows how to face the problem. For that it is necessary:

- Accuracy of the information
- Fast delivery of information
- Openness/empathy
- Credibility and confidence

MESSAGE

During an emergency, the effectiveness of the messages will depend on: the accuracy and reliability of the source of information (the prestige, post, charisma, and knowledge), the decision of transmitting the message without delay, the communication method and the diffusion network. Moreover:

- The message must focus more on how to act than in the threat itself.
- Information must be reassuring, depending on the emotional state.
- Rapidly spread reassuring rumors in order to avoid public despair.

During a crisis, the messages must have some characteristics in order to help conveying the company's messages:

- Deliver the messages as quickly as possible in a short and clear way.
- Manage the crisis with transparency and honesty. Avoid unnecessary exaggeration; the emergency must not affect other departments of the company which are not involved in the crisis situation.
- Keep to the facts, do not make assumptions.
- Explain what is being done to solve the problem. The priority is to find a solution, not to focus on what happened.
- Manage emotions during public pronouncements. Be humble, avoid arrogance.
- Prioritize victims.

TRAINING

Previous training of the specialized teams, authorities and general population is fundamental in emergency plans. Pre-training helps to be better prepared to face the emergency.

- Each person knows beforehand what is his or her responsibility in the emergency plan.
- Improve the preparation and training of the specialists dedicated to this area.
- Detailed evaluation and emergency plans.
- A good communication system that can fulfill its important purpose.

In crisis communications, training and prevention of risk scenarios are fundamental to help the company to better tackle these kinds of situations. Few are the executives in this business who take into account all of that. Generally, they only pay attention to this kind of information when they are in the middle of a crisis.

Some measures that are part of the pre-training are:

- Training spokespersons of the different departments of the company.
- Creating a risk map detailing all the possible problems the company may encounter per work area, and how to avoid and solve them.
- Having a communication plan in the event of a crisis.
- Writing a crisis communication manual that establishes: the roles of each member of the company, how each crisis will be faced and how the communication with each stakeholder will occur, among others issues.
- Establishing and defining the competencies of the Crisis Committee of the company.

SIMULATED PRACTICE

Thanks to the simulated practices, the emergency plan will be fully implemented and the people will have to learn how to respond appropriately to the situation: what must be done regarding oneself and others; where to go: what needs to be done, etc.

The aim is to automate behaviors in situations and conditions which are very similar to those in a real emergency scenario, in order to gain experience and control.

The simulated practices will be carried out as many times as possible to automate the behaviors above mentioned, especially in places where the risk is high.

Studies conducted by several experts show that the more we get used to face risk situations, the less dangerous they become. It is with good reason that we made emergency drills.

The same recommendation applies to communication. This is why drills are made: to test the management team and the crisis manuals.

The drill requires the participation of the whole team, the manuals are followed, and in the end, an assessment is made in order to make corrections and update the manual, which is a living document.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Mismanagement of the crisis, not the crisis in itself, discredits the companies. Take the time to create your Steering Committee, analyze the characteristics of their personality, be always prepared and improve/update your crisis manual

Preparation is the key for success, and a good preparation requires an intense planning. The planning requires the priority development of preventive actions. All of this is needed in order to place the company in the best possible position to manage the risk when it becomes necessary. Do not forget that the motto is that crisis are managed before they even occur.



>> **Margorieth Tejeira** is Senior Director at LLORENTE & CUENCA Panama. Margorieth was previously Communications Manager at the National Bank of Panama, and was in charge of publicizing and handling the crisis stemming from the State banking modernization project. She worked at the Ministry of Trade and Industries of Panama on closing the Trade Promotion Treaty with the United States. She has experience in crisis accounts, public affairs and infrastructure. Mrs Tejeira has a Degree in Journalism from Universidad de Panamá and a Diploma in Free Trade Agreements from Universidad Latinoamericana de Comercio Exterior [Foreign Trade University of Latin America]. She also worked as a journalist, presenter and news coordinator in both radio and television media.

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