



# IN THE MEDIA SPOTLIGHT – HOW WOULD YOUR CHARITY REACT TO A MAJOR CRISIS?

In this article, Robin Swinbank, a crisis management specialist from communications consultancy The Counsel House, explains the skills a chief executive will need to call on in a crisis.

Charities may feel ill prepared to deal with a crisis that could throw their organisation into the media spotlight.

It is true that any chief executive of a FTSE-listed company worth their salt would have had extensive training in crisis management. They would be able to call on an in-house corporate comms team for advice and have the best PR agencies working on their behalf. They would also most likely be quite conversant in dealing with the media on an almost daily basis and would have had intensive media training to help them with this role. For obvious reasons, these resources are simply not available to a chief executive of a small to medium-sized charity.

It's often a great shock for those whose purpose is providing for the greater good to suddenly face a terrible situation linked to their own organisation, which could potentially damage its reputation beyond repair.

Initially, they might feel like a rabbit caught in the headlights, not at all sure how to act. The key, of course, is to remain calm and objective and deal with the problem they are facing head on.

I would advise chief executives to look to inspire their teams by realising these four skills within themselves: leadership, vision, clarity and confidence.

## Leadership

This is an essential quality in a crisis. At all times, it is vital that the chief executive is seen to be the lead spokesperson for the charity. Should the media spotlight fall on your organisation, it is important not to be seen to shy away from its intensity. Do not give the impression that others in your own organisation, especially junior employees, have been given the task of publicly defending the charity to the media.

If you are evasive and appear to hide behind others, you will lose public sympathy and alienate the media. If you are confident, calm and objective, then this is how you will appear to the public. It shows leadership and will draw the public into being more sympathetic to your cause.

## Vision

This comes from clarity of purpose. It is always important to have a plan of action and a clear objective in mind. Set yourself the objective of turning disaster into opportunity. The aim should be that your organisation will be better placed once the disaster is over than it was before it occurred. It is good practice to put the plan in writing. We have produced a [10-step plan for effective crisis management](#) which can be used as the basis for formulating such a plan.

## Clarity

The ability to communicate clearly and with brevity will be essential. Crisis management is often perceived to be a media relations exercise, but actually it requires the ability to understand who all your key stakeholders are and keep them 'onside' throughout the whole process, be they trustees, donors, volunteers or supporters. Clarity comes from keeping communications simple. The first priority in almost any crisis will be to draft short 'holding statements' which outline the situation as best as you are able to present it at the time. In these statements, provide facts, not opinions. Use this device to your advantage. It will make the organisation look like it is willingly co-operative with the media and is happy to respond to any and all press enquires in a timely fashion. It helps avoid dialogue with the press about the detail of the case or the need to enter into question and answer sessions until you are ready to do so. You can also use these statements in communicating with all your stakeholders.



## Confidence

You will be judged by the media and public alike by your ability to perform under pressure. This builds trust. Appearing emotional, defensive and suspicious of the media will not play well with the public. Avoid looking as if you are hurt by criticism or offended by media intrusion. Be open, transparent and honest in your relations with the media and avoid argument or confrontation. If the implication is that there are 'victims' of the situation, appear sympathetic to their plight without apologising or accepting liability or blame until culpability is proven. The appearance of being calm under pressure will pay dividends.

In summary, a chief executive in a crisis should rise to the occasion. As John F Kennedy, a man who had to deal with some major world-shaking crises, said: "The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis'. One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger, but recognise the opportunity."

*Robin Swinbank is managing partner of the Counsel House, an independent consultancy that supports Markel Insurance policyholders in the event of adverse press, publicity or media attention.*

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