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The Final 5 Steps for Handling Healthcare Crisis Communications – Part II

❌ 6. Be proactive and beware of legal landmines. Legal counsel is imperative to avoid running afoul of laws and regulations, but legal counsel is not a substitute for public relations counsel. Institutional lawyers are often very conservative and may advise against releasing crisis-related information. Recognize, however, that more than likely, patient information, regulatory actions or provider names are already in the public domain by the time the organization receives the media call. Remember: Be honest, transparent and

forthright. If there are legitimate issues of privacy or confidentiality, honor the aggrieved party's or family's wishes. Otherwise, don't hide behind legal arguments.

7. Select the right external spokesman for the situation. Many organizations make the mistake of having a low-level PR spokesperson communicate with the media when the situation could likely be better addressed by an alternate subject-matter expert. However, the CEO does not need to be the media face for every situation. In fact, conventional wisdom suggests that the CEO should make a public (on-camera) statement only in the top or bottom 5% of good or bad situations. The organization should consider the nature of the crisis and choose the most appropriate spokesperson for the type of crisis. For example, a physician (usually a physician in the specialty precipitating the issue or dealing with the crisis) might be considered for delicate clinical situations. If the critical situation is politically charged, deals with governance issues or needs to create stability in the event of an abrupt CEO departure, the Board chair might be considered.

8. In written statements – press releases, letters to the editor, advertorials, etc. – always be professional, compassionate and remorseful. Reassure the public that appropriate operational remedies have already been implemented. Don't try to do battle with or in the press; refrain from complaining about media hype and excessive scrutiny. Do not be combative or defensive; take the high road and remind the public about the organization's serious and clear mandate and its overriding focus on delivering quality and compassionate care to its community.

9. In verbal statements, stick to the message points. Don't get rattled or be led astray by inflammatory questions or conjecture on the part of the reporter. Make sure that the on-camera spokesperson has been coached on how to bring the conversation back to the key message points. Be truthful and concise in the interview and avoid being led into speculation. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be evasive. Acknowledge the question itself and promise to get the answer if you can. Reporters may encourage you to keep talking by

nodding and leaving what may seem to be excessive silence or wide open spaces in the conversation. Don't bite, however. Make your points, stop, and wait for the next question.

10. Let the organization get back to business. The fact of the matter is that most organizations go through crisis-related peaks and valleys and, sooner or later, a critical issue is likely to come your way. But an effective CEO can control or at least temper the unwanted hype by thoughtful, calm and collected leadership and true organizational integrity and transparency. Don't beat yourself up, don't focus on the negatives, and realize that this, too, shall pass. Redouble your efforts to be visible in order to reassure your staff and your constituents that your leadership, your command of the situation, your transparency and your empathy will once again bring calm waters and mission focus to the organization. Your leadership will likely be tested but will definitely be honed as you navigate through tough adverse situations. The CEO's job is to manage the event itself, minimize the reputational fallout, reassure the public and other key constituents, and inspire the team members to get back to the business of delivering extraordinary healthcare.

South Florida Hospital News and Healthcare Report's number one goal is top quality healthcare journalism written and edited for the region's most successful, powerful healthcare business executives and professionals.



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