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Five Elements of Effective Risk and Crisis Communication

Communications Planning in Advance Can Help Schools Avoid Risks Down the Line

In these difficult days when schools are closed as a result of COVID-19 and an air of uncertainty hangs over everything, effective communication with your community and stakeholders can be the difference between staying safe and unnecessarily putting people's lives at risk. NYSIR understands the importance of proactive and thoughtful communications and offers free crisis communications services to its members, should the need arise, and crisis communications training to its BOCES members. Click [HERE](#) for details.

These services are available to help member school districts or BOCES focus appropriate attention and energy on the need to speak promptly and forthrightly about a challenge or crisis and how they are responding to it. Like any organization, school entities may risk compounding the damage or creating a whole new crisis if they are seen as speaking slowly, clumsily, incompletely or disingenuously to parents, students, employees, journalists, elected officials and other stakeholders.

Proactive planning can help minimize the effects of a crisis. Following these five tips can help you be prepared for the unknown and ensure that a crisis doesn't last any longer than it needs to.

1. Plan and evaluate your efforts.

Before you develop your messages, it's critical to know who your audience is. School districts and BOCES primarily deal with two core audiences—parents and employees. Make sure you take into consideration the outrage level, the hazard level and the setting. With this foundation, you can develop an effective plan for communication and help develop trust with your core audiences. You can then gauge the effectiveness of your messaging and make any corrections or adjustments using those criteria as a baseline.

2. Listen to concerns.

To develop trust in the event of a crisis, people have to know that you are listening to their viewpoint and taking their concerns seriously. Ensure that you communicate that you've noticed the problem, that you care about it, and that you are in control and doing something about it. People want to see that you are empathetic to what they are facing, that you see their concerns as valid and deserving of time and effort to address them.

3. Be honest, frank and open.

A principal factor in whether your messages are effective is whether your audience trusts you and feels that you are credible. The best way to establish trust is to be open and honest about a risk or crisis and how it will affect them. People deal with bad news much better than they deal with uncertainty. Facts are your friends and are a key tool when trying to defuse anger, suspicion and hostility because you won't appear to be trying to hide or evade responsibility.

4. Meet the needs of the media.

Along with your employees and parents, the media is another important partner during a crisis. Establishing relationships with media members before a crisis occurs can help to ensure that the messages broadcast align with your narrative. If the media sees you providing everything you know as soon as you know it and operating in a truthful, open manner, reporters will be much less likely to be suspicious, skeptical and hostile, because they are now depending on you to be their primary source for news and information. Also keep in mind that the media's needs may differ from those of your employees and parents, and certain situations may require creating separate messages for each audience.

5. Speak clearly and with compassion.

In a crisis, things can change by the minute, and you need to be able to speak with clarity on any new developments. Therefore, be sure to practice your messaging and rehearse different scenarios so you can address them comfortably with your audience. Speaking with compassion is also crucial, particularly if an incident or situation has resulted in injuries or fatalities for a member of the school community.

When a school district or BOCES faces the perception or reality that it has done something wrong, timely counsel from communications experts on what to say as well as when and how to say it can minimize damage to reputations of school districts and school district officials. It can also limit the impact of future liability claims on the district and its taxpayers. Given the unprecedented and fluid nature of today's school environment, having a communications plan in place before a crisis hits has never been more important.

For any organization, the news may not always be good, even when you're doing the right thing. How you handle yourself in the first hours of a crisis determines the outcome—how you are ultimately viewed in the "court of public opinion." If your district or BOCES is facing a crisis, call your NYSIR representative. The communications consultants NYSIR works with have broad national experience conducting training and providing urgent counsel on a range of school-based crises.

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