



TEMIN AND COMPANY

REPUTATION MATTERS

You Have 15 Minutes to Respond to a Crisis:

A CHECKLIST OF DOS AND DON'TS

www.TeminandCompany.com

You Have 15 Minutes to Respond to a Crisis:

A CHECKLIST OF DOS AND DON'TS

When a crisis hits, how you respond in the first 15 minutes can make or break your organization – and your reputation.

While we all know that crisis management training is critical for leaders and boards today, much of it still tends to be shopworn, focusing on the lessons of yesterday. The new climate of ultra urgency is rarely emphasized sufficiently.

Yet we have found that in those first 15 minutes of a crisis your response must be exactly the right message, delivered in exactly the right words, to the right audiences, in just the right way – or you will have to deal with your mistakes for days, weeks, even months to come.

Immediate response and indelible accountability – that's a tall order for any leader.

Yesterday We Had the Luxury of Time

It used to be standard to have until the end of day to get back to a press or customer inquiry about most crises. Even if the call was from a television

network or local station, you could put off any interview until mid-afternoon. Then you might be able to respond by phone, or in a well-choreographed interview, in front of a backdrop of your choosing, to be aired on the nightly news.

Even in the iconic Tylenol crisis case – still considered by corporate execs as a best practice in crisis management – it took the company three days to decide to remove all bottles of Tylenol from store shelves, after several people were killed by taking cyanide-laced capsules from unsealed bottles. And that was deemed fast work.

Today Immediacy is Key

When news is transmitted around the globe in a nanosecond over social media, featuring real-time pictures and videos, there is little to no time to position, posture or even understand the facts before you are pressed to make a statement.

Because, if you do not speak for yourself quickly, or if you do so poorly, someone else – antagonist, police, government, competitor or anonymous hater – will speak for you. And in the world of public perception, the first mover has the advantage.

What is a Leader to Do?

Clearly the first 15 minutes after you learn of a crisis are just the beginning of what could be a very long haul. Lawyers whisper in one ear, “Say nothing, make no comment until we evaluate all the facts, and our liability.” As crisis managers, we whisper in the other ear, urging swift action to get out ahead of the problem, or at least keep apace. And at the same time, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Reddit feeds are lighting up second-by-second with photos, interviews, information and misinformation you have never seen before.

The “First 15 Minutes” Crisis Management Checklist

The critical element turns out to be how to fit a day’s worth of activity into 15 minutes.

Following is our list for leaders of “Dos” and “Don’ts” in the first 15 minutes of any crisis – be it predictable or black swan – from the minute you hear about a problem to the moment you make your first statement. It does not cover the crisis preparedness work you should have already done (that’s another list), nor the entire arc of crisis activities you will be engaged in starting from the 16th minute until resolution and recovery. But

You Have 15 Minutes To Respond To A Crisis: A Checklist of Do's and Don't's



it’s a place for leaders to start when crisis hits:

DO

- Resolve to become the trusted voice in this crisis – the person and organization that people turn to for the truth and solutions.
- Stop whatever you are doing and calmly, but immediately, turn your full attention to the matter at hand. This may seem obvious, but it is surprising how many leaders cannot

disengage from what they were doing when a crisis hits.

- Pull the trigger on your crisis plan if you have one (these steps should all be in that plan, of course).
- Alert your crisis team (assuming you have already designated one, and if not, your management team) immediately, and assemble them in person or virtually in an hour.
- Assess what you must do yourself and what you can delegate in the specific situation. Begin to delegate with urgency.
- Immediately designate trusted lieutenants to find out the facts – their first reports to be made in seven minutes.
- Designate another trusted lieutenant to connect with law enforcement, or other critical parties involved in the situation.
- Monitor in real-time what is being said on social and traditional media – sometimes Twitter tells you more in real-time than any other source. You need to know what is out there already so you can begin to set the record straight.
- Try to understand the scope of the issue as you know it and the critical decisions that must be made immediately.
- Draft an initial “holding statement” with the help of your head of communications, crisis manager, and/or legal counsel. This is a statement you can issue immediately. It should state what, if anything, you believe you know, with the caveat that these are early impressions that may not be totally correct. Reinforce that you are committed to finding out as much as you can immediately, and that you will stay in touch with your audiences continually, as you know more.
- Think through every word: under stress you can say the wrong thing, your words may be misinterpreted, or you can say too little or too much.
- Depending upon the magnitude and kind of crisis, issue your holding statement to waiting print and broadcast media, over the wire, by email, and post it on your website, intranet, and social media feeds, etc.
- Match your communications to the issue: seek to neither under- nor over-communicate.
- Show humanity, compassion, and concern for any human toll – and mean it. Make people your first priority.
- Make sure to correct any errors of fact that are already public. Try not to speak personally to the media or hold a press conference

immediately. Get some solid facts before you do.

- Contact your employees, board, shareholders, and other key audiences at the same time – or just before you communicate to the media – sharing with them your public statements.
- If appropriate, video a quick personal statement from the CEO or other leader that is steady, strong, compassionate, and solution-driven. It can go on your intranet, emergency communications system, and even your website.
- Resolve to follow up on everything you have promised to do; revise your estimates as you get more knowledge.
- Begin the process of triage, discovery, communication, solution, accountability, and recovery.

DON'T

- Don't lie – your first words will be long remembered, as will be your tone and intent. Scrutiny is at a peak in the first moments of a crisis, and your comments may go viral – among your employees, shareholders and regulators, as well as over social media.
- Don't disappear. As tempting as it might be to go underground until the storm passes, your voice, presence, and guidance are needed, especially by your workforce.
- Don't issue a denial until you have all the facts. If you issue a denial and are then proven to be wrong, your credibility is shot for the duration.
- Don't minimize the situation. Things tend to look more contained at the outset of a crisis than they do as it unfolds. Minimizing may feel like the right strategy initially, but it is not. Rather, say “We do not yet know the magnitude of the problem, but are working furiously to find out.”
- Do NOT make a joke. You must be serious and respectful as a crisis unfolds. One of the biggest signs of respect you can give someone is to pay attention to their claims, upfront, even if they are later disproved.
- Do not say “We are taking the matter seriously,” even though you are. No one believes this reflexive statement. In fact, it has come to mean the exact opposite. Figure out another way to phrase the sentiment.
- Don't repeat the problem or accusation when delivering your statement – make the statement proactive and put it in positive, but not Pollyanna-like language.
- Don't let your fears of liability trump your humanity. Compassion and kindness are critical.

- Don't speculate until you fully understand the situation.
- Don't get drawn into interminable series of internal meetings and think you are making progress when you are not – focus both inwardly and outwardly, simultaneously.

To Sum Up

If you can do the first 15 minutes of a crisis right, you are on your way to finding solutions, fixing the problems and repairing and recovering from the damage. Do them wrong, and you will be dealing with damage control not only for the crisis, but for your early mistakes, for a long, long time to come.

Originally published in "Reputation Matters" on Forbes.com.

About Temin and Company

Temin and Company Incorporated creates, enhances, and saves reputations.

Temin and Company also markets by leveraging the expertise, ideas and insight of its clients to produce differentiated intellectual capital and content.

The firm helps corporations, professional services firms, and other institutions define and strengthen their public image – and their bottom line – through strategic marketing; branding; media relations; thought leadership; social media; speaker, media and leadership coaching; financial communications; and crisis and reputation management.

Strategists, coaches, writers, and social media experts are available “25/8” to assure that every crisis is addressed, and every opportunity leveraged.

Clients include the CEOs and Boards of some of the world’s largest and most well-known corporations, financial institutions, portfolio companies, pharma and biotech companies, law firms, consulting firms, publishing houses, venture capital and private equity firms, authors, politicians, and colleges and universities.