SHIFT HAPPENS: CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN THE 21st CENTURY

Today, with the sometimes unpredictable nature of travel, unstable political climates and increasing demands from a preparedness perspective, the topic of crisis management appears more and more within organizations planning meetings and events. As the industry and world changes, these conversations need to shift as well. To begin, you must be informed on the current standing of your crisis management plan.

Shift happens in many ways. When an unexpected, challenging or frightening situation occurs, you go from feeling safe to facing fear. You move from having confidence in your operational actions to feeling wholly unprepared to take next steps. You shift from relying on standard operating procedures to questioning every decision. Crisis of any kind can cause a shift in our perception that can drastically affect our reality and how we interact with it.

Let’s explore some of the changes that should be happening within these conversations when developing a crisis management plan.

In the world of meetings and events, refusing to consider the elements of change in the 21st century can have unwanted consequences. These may include a client’s loss of confidence in your abilities, damage to your corporate image, possible litigious consequences relating to your action or inaction and an unnecessary waste of resources. As we are seeing with increased frequency, active shooter scenarios, illness and threats to cyber-security/data are not confined to high risk locations. Crises can arise both internally and externally and may have everything or nothing to do with the organization you are representing; but can affect you and your team regardless.
Some companies rely on the idea that someone else has already developed a plan to deal with these kinds of situations and that there’s no need to prepare a plan of their own. While this may be true for many of the hotels we stay in, meeting spaces we use, restaurants we dine in and local transportation companies we interact with, it’s also possible that what they have prepared is incomplete for a given situation and not in line with your client needs. Ask yourself this:

- Has a full range of possible scenarios been considered and are the right people trained in responding to those crises?
- Does their staff know the plan and/or where to find it?
- Are their responses mainly oriented at protecting themselves from liability and litigation or are they oriented at helping to resolve the situation as best they can for all the parties involved?
- How will the people you’re representing on-site feel if you rely on someone else to respond to unexpected circumstances?

While most crisis management plans reach a point when responsibility turns to authorities, there’s always a window of time when it’s up to you, the person leading a given group, to take steps in ensuring safety for yourself and your clients. What you do in that time can be critical.

How do you prepare to deal with a crisis situation if and when one should arise? What other shifts need to be considered?

FIRST AND FOREMOST IS A WELL THOUGHT OUT PLAN

A thorough plan should specify any and all rules that need to be followed and consider a wide variety of possible crisis scenarios and responses. If you work for a large enough organization, your HR department has most likely already considered and formulated hard and fast rules around a number of issues any Crisis Communication Plan should detail. You should know what policies you need to stick by and which ones are flexible. For instance, will your client’s company cover the costs of medical treatment if one of their participants is unable to? What are the other options if they find themselves at a hospital unable to pay the bill? What is your company’s medication policy? Is it ok to act in opposition to that policy in any environment? Most company’s HR departments clearly state that it’s unacceptable to share or dispense OTC medication to a fellow employee. In today’s litigious climate there may be legal consequences if someone we’ve shared medication with has an adverse reaction. Why then, do many of us think it’s acceptable to violate this policy? In the past, this type of thing happened so often on-site that it would have been strange to be told “no” when asking for aspirin. Shift happens. You need to be sure that your plan’s rules and policies are clear and communicated effectively to avoid unnecessarily creating a new crisis.
New types of threats to health and security will continue to arise and organizations need to proactively prepare. Active shooter incidents have been appearing more and more in the recent news; so much so that FEMA and DHS have created documentation and videos to train employees on how to deal with these types of threats. Cyber-security threats are another recent concern—not just to your business but to your event attendees as well. Hackers now have access to inexpensive methods of gaining access to information on your phone, tablet or computer. The equipment required is small, making it easy to conceal, and it takes almost no time to set up a fake Wi-Fi landing page where attendees may be duped into entering confidential information. Shift happens.

For a specific program in a specific location, you’ll need to adapt your plan to cover the distinctions of that destination and client. Details will shift from program to program.

• What resources does the location have to deal with an incident?
• What are the closest medical facilities and/or doctor; what are their hours of operation and what types of payment do they accept?
• Where is the closest embassy and how can you contact them?
• Is there private security detail at the facility where your function is being held? Are they trained to help in a medical emergency?
• Do any of the staff at your function know first aid or CPR?
• Is there an AED machine in or near your function? Are any of the staff at your function trained to use it?
• Where are the closest fire and police stations, and how do you contact them in case of an emergency? The number to dial probably isn’t 911 if you’re outside of the U.S. In addition, many venues would prefer that you have them dial emergency services through their operator so that they can be met by the facility’s security and guided to the correct location.
• What are the evacuation areas and routes at your event venues? How will an evacuation be communicated if necessary?

While you can’t plan for everything, that’s certainly no reason to avoid creating a plan at all.

**COMMITMENT TO GOOD COMMUNICATION**

Communication is key to effective crisis management. Begin by discussing the plan and its contingencies with your team and client well in advance of the event. Agree on the details along with roles and responsibilities for each team member during a potential situation. Ensure this is clearly documented in your on-site materials.
Often, a client will have their own internal protocols and procedures that need to be followed in case of an emergency. This by no means alleviates the need to develop and discuss your own plan, but it does necessitate a discussion to determine whose plan will take precedence on-site and whether that plan needs to be enhanced with elements from each. Be sure to discuss the importance of communication, decision making, following the plan and documentation in any crisis scenario with your program partners. These include hotels, DMCs, travel directors and event venues. They won’t know how important it is to you and your client unless you let them know. Although you may feel that you’ve done your due diligence in relaying these concerns during the planning phase of a program, have your planning partners communicated your concerns to their employees? Often you find that important issues that were discussed in the planning phase have never been discussed with the on-site managers of the program.

Discuss any and all relevant details of your plan with your program partners to make sure everyone knows what you expect and who will be involved in making critical decisions.

- Who should your vendors contact if they are the first involved in any situation?
- Who should your team contact if they’re the first involved?

Technology and the expectations of instantaneous contact, response and resolution are now a dominant factor in how we communicate.

Your staff and participants likely own and travel with laptops and smart phones, giving them easy access to e-mail, text and calls most anywhere you might have a corporate event. Shift happens. Be sure to consider how technology can support your communication efforts in crisis management. Plan to utilize your event app, texting and other options. But, also consider what happens if you find yourself unable to rely on technology because of a crisis. How will you communicate with your program participants if this happens? In the event of a crisis you may need to communicate regularly with attendees and their emergency contacts. Remember to always have a paper copy of their contact information in case you can’t access it electronically.

The shift in speed at which information travels today has other consequences that need to be considered as well. A crisis may become “newsworthy” fairly quickly, necessitating a corporate statement to the media. Ask yourself the following:

- Is your client particularly likely to be the subject of critical news?
- Do you know who to contact in your organization and your client’s organization should you need a statement to the media?
- Who is allowed to speak with the media on behalf of your organizations?
- What should you and your staff say if you are not authorized spokespersons but questioned by the media nonetheless? Some companies go so far as to have a predetermined reply written on a business card for easy access by your on-site team.

These may seem like minor considerations now, but preparing for them may help you avoid a lot of unnecessary damage to both your companies’ reputations. This brings us to the next element needed in effective crisis management.
A CLEAR CHAIN OF COMMAND

Most companies have a tiered plan detailing decision making and communication escalation in case of an emergency. It needs to be clear and agreed upon as to who needs to be involved in any incident’s resolution and who is responsible for contacting the necessary decision makers. This is a standard approach to the command, control and coordination of emergency responses, and it is especially important to have this clearly established on-site. It provides clarity of command, allowing your staff to operate in an organized and effective way, and it ensures that everyone who needs to be involved in making a decision is recognized.

Be sure your program partners know who they need to contact first on your team in case of an emergency. A program pre-con is a great time to share these details again with your operational partners.

Will your client have their own on-site security team at your meeting? Many larger corporations do. If so, make sure to clearly establish their place in the chain of command. Also be sure to determine what situations their security team will handle and what situations your team will need to handle.

INFOGRAPHIC

**INFORMATION COLLECTION AND DOCUMENTATION**

If you need to communicate with your attendees during an incident, then it is critical that you have collected and confirmed their correct contact information and their emergency contact’s information. A quick review of the information they’ve entered while registering for a program will show where you’re missing important details that need follow-up. It’s also recommended to collect any pertinent international travel document information, like passport details. These might be important if you have the type of crisis that causes you to contact a country’s embassy.

**INFOMGRAPHIC**

*Ask your attendees to bring photocopies of all travel documents in case they are lost or stolen. It’s worth recommending that your attendees leave a copy of their credit card, health insurance information and passport with an emergency contact.*
For international travel, it’s beneficial recommending that your attendees consider purchasing travel insurance if their company doesn’t already provide it for them. A small investment can provide significant coverage for them. According to the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, the cost of medical evacuation back to the U.S. alone can reach six figures.

Make sure that you have a copy of your client’s valid corporate liability and insurance documents. Collecting and documenting accurate information during any incident is key to protecting yourself legally. Create an easily accessible incident response form and have relevant team members complete it together, including any updates or resolutions that may come after the initial incident has passed. Also, be sure that the form is being shared with any other pertinent parties, like your management team and possibly your legal team. And if possible, be sure to collect copies of any and all other incident reports that were filled out by your program partners.

After the program has concluded, you’ll want to debrief as a team on any incidents that occurred. Having clear and accurate paperwork to discuss these issues is essential to reviewing them and learning from the event. Ultimately, when there is any occurrence on-site, there is also the chance of litigation over that incident. If you have thorough documentation of any incident from a number of the involved parties then you won’t have to guess at the details later when they are questioned again and again.

Shift happens—it’s unavoidable. As individuals and companies who are passionate about helping to plan and create meaningful experiences and events, we certainly want to avoid the possibility that anything out of our control may impact our investment and attendee experience. Expectations have shifted and so have the consequences of being unprepared. So we must plan ahead to respond effectively to crisis.

**CURRENT TRENDS IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

- Enhanced proactive training around active shooter response
- Increased communications prior to the event to enlighten participants on how to prepare, behave and travel more safely
- Increased corporate investment in on-site security
- Clearly incorporating the use of program apps to communicate useful info in the case of a crisis (meeting points, evacuation routes, people to contact, etc.)
- More proactive discussions about data security practices on-site and implementing solutions
- Yearly internal crisis communication meetings to review and discuss updates

**REMEMBER:**

- Create a well thought out plan
- Commit your team to good communication practices
- Ensure a clear chain of command with defined decision makers
- Collect, document and analyze useful information

*These steps will create a reliable plan for those circumstances we can predict but cannot avoid.*
CASE STUDY

The Situation

On the morning of March 22, 2016, three coordinated suicide bombings occurred in Belgium: two at the Brussels Airport and one at the metro station in the city center. Thirty-two civilians and three perpetrators were killed and hundreds of people injured. An additional bomb was found in a subsequent search of the airport.

BCD Meetings & Events was operating a number of different programs across Europe and had 308 attendees who were traveling through Brussels at the time of the attack.

Action

As soon as news of the Brussels attack was reported, the BCD Global Crisis Management Team was informed of situation via a memo alert flash. At this point, our crisis management plan went into action.

Steps taken:

- Reviewed travel dates for current running program: departures/returns of those affected by the shut down of the airport
- Lists of participants cross-checked to ensure accuracy
- Communication escalated to appropriate team leaders
- BCD M&E leadership checked with staff on location to confirm they were in control of situation and solved first departures of affected passengers
- Priority list created; action taken to help those wounded or with same-day departures, followed by those with departures in the coming week

Result

Within three hours of first being informed of the event, analysis of the situation was escalated to the appropriate management team and action steps were taken. First focus was on communicating with team leaders on the ground to ensure participants were accounted for. Next, a priority re-booking list was created for attendees with same-day departure dates and those wounded. Lists were double checked and every participant contacted directly—using contact information collected before the program began. Our flexible and dedicated staff ensured that all participants were booked on flights as necessary with no delays or extra costs. The sense of urgency was understood by everyone immediately. A very stressful and serious situation was handled professionally and quickly because everyone knew where to step in and what role they played in the crisis management plan.