Top Management Communication During Crises: Guidelines and a 'Perfect Example' of a Crisis Leader

By Betty Farmer and Leila Tvedt

Top management communication is increasingly considered a critical component of an organization's overall public relations strategy. In times of crisis, the CEO’s communication becomes even more important. Mitroff (2004) distinguishes between a crisis manager and a crisis leader. As management guru Peter Drucker put it: “Managers do ‘thing right’ whereas Leaders determine what are the ‘right things’ to do in the first place.” (Mitroff, p. 54). In “The CEO’s ‘how to’ guide to crisis communications,” Loretta Ucelli, former White House communications director for President Bill Clinton, advises: “The CEO must be front and center. Visibility cannot be delegated. Leadership cannot be delegated.” Unfortunately, from Exxon to Enron, we have numerous examples of CEOs who have failed to provide leadership in times of crisis or who have been the cause of their organizations’ crises.

So when a CEO becomes a crisis leader and helps his organization emerge from a crisis stronger than its pre-crisis state, we should examine the leader’s communication and learn from his example. Such was the sentiment of Robert C. Gabordi, the executive editor of the daily, regional newspaper, the Asheville Citizen-Times, who lauded Western Carolina University Chancellor John Bardo for his skillful handling of a three-day dorm fire crisis on the campus in Cullowhee, North Carolina, in October 2003. Gabordi’s front-page editorial led with the headline: “Western’s chancellor a perfect example of how a good leader should act in a crisis.”

During this crisis, Dr. Bardo went to extraordinary lengths to be open and honest with an inquiring media and campus community and to reassure panicking students and concerned parents. Bardo’s communication illustrates many of Ucelli’s guidelines for effective CEO communication in times of crisis, including:

- The CEO must be front and center.
- Respond quickly.
- Do not sugar coat the truth.
- Err on the side of overcommunication.
- What you say must reflect what you do. Actions must be consistent with words.
- Talk to all the stakeholders.
- Use crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate leadership.

Following is an overview of the crisis and highlights of Bardo’s communication strategy.

Fire Number One: The crisis began at approximately 1:40 a.m. on October 28, 2003 when the
Resident Assistant (RA) on the fifth floor of Scott Hall, a nine-story co-ed facility with 680 students, reported a fire. The fire alarms were activated, the entire building was evacuated according to University policies, and residents of Scott Hall fled into the cold night, many wearing their pajamas and wondering what was going on. Both campus police and the local fire department responded. It was determined that the fire was started in a fifth-floor bathroom. A plastic trashcan and rolls of toilet paper in four stalls were burning. Another RA extinguished the fire and damages were minimal. Residents returned to their rooms, frustrated, but not overly concerned. Senior university officials were briefed on the incident, and the public relations office was informed, but there seemed to be no reason for crisis communications for what appeared to be an isolated incident at this point.

Fire Number Two: That perception changed dramatically and frustration turned to fear when, approximately 24 hours later, on October 29 at 2:51 a.m., the fire alarm in Scott Hall sounded once again notifying police of a second fire on the same floor, once again originating in a plastic trashcan in a bathroom. This time, the west wing of the building was engulfed in thick, black smoke and there was enough heat to activate the sprinkler system. Hundreds of gallons of water flooded the fifth and fourth floors. Eleven students reported property damages totaling approximately $6,000.

All the students were once again evacuated in the middle of the night. Students fleeing the building were visibly concerned, upset and afraid. After the first fire, questions about safety had begun to surface, with residents in Scott Hall feeling particularly nervous. Now, the students were most concerned. As one student put it, “One fire is a prank; two fires in a row is serious business.” Some students characterized the situation as a “state of panic.” Students could be seen on cell phones and heard speaking to their parents, and parents began calling for information while emergency personnel and police were still responding to the second fire.

Campus police, residential living staff, and local fire officials who responded to the second fire immediately recognized the seriousness of the situation and alerted senior officials. Crisis communications got underway immediately at several levels and the University’s crisis communications team stayed active for the next two days. Following are highlights of the crisis communication team’s response after the second fire:

- Chancellor Bardo arrived soon on the scene at Scott Hall and talked with distraught students, individually and in groups. The Chancellor’s presence had a calming influence and the students seemed reassured by his personal attention even though he could not explain what was happening or promise them that the crisis was over.

- Behind the scenes, Chancellor Bardo was in constant contact with his senior staff and campus police. He ordered that the State Bureau of Investigation be contacted. University Police had already reported the fires to the SBI, but no agents were immediately available. The Chief of Police kept in contact with the arson specialists at the state level to ensure Western could get assistance if needed. The Chief of Police spent the majority of the second day returning calls to concerned parents and media until the Chancellor set up a system to direct all such calls to the Office of Public Relations (OPR).

- Chancellor Bardo chaired regular — several times daily — face-to-face meetings with his senior staff, including the vice chancellors of student affairs and external relations, to ensure that information was being exchanged effectively among the key players involved in managing the crisis and to review statements
prepared by OPR to respond to calls from concerned parents and the media.

- OPR used the University's web site to post information and timely updates for the campus, the public, and media.

- Student Affairs used the campus "Pipeline" to reach students electronically, and the Director of Residential living sent a letter to students in Scott Hall informing them that authorities were investigating, reassuring them that the fire protection systems had worked properly, and asking for their assistance.

- The Vice Chancellor for Administration and Finance authorized a $1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person responsible for setting the fires. Student Affairs distributed that information electronically on "Pipeline" and on paper fliers across campus.

- The Counseling Center went into high gear to provide counseling and comfort, especially for members of the sorority that was housed on the fifth floor of Scott Hall who feared they were being targeted.

- Publicly, the Chancellor reiterated his promise to "prosecute to the fullest extent of the law" the individual responsible for the fires.

- Chancellor Bardo also shared his concern for the students. Leaders are expected to acknowledge fears and frustrations and to express sympathy to the families and loved ones of people who have been affected by crises. Dr. Bardo expressed great empathy and was quoted as saying: "Anything that affects the health and welfare of one of our kids is like affecting the health and safety of one of my own kids. I reacted with the same intensity as a parent."

- Campus police issued a "timely warning" with basic information about both fires, assigned extra officers to patrol the building, and sent trained student volunteers to assist.

- Western also notified the University of North Carolina system, of which it is a member, and kept the Office of the President apprised of the situation.

Fire Number Three: Security was increased Wednesday night as all University police officers were called in or placed on standby. Eight part-time auxiliary officers were brought in to patrol inside every dorm that night. Ten campus police student workers were summoned to back up officers in every dorm all night. Finally, an officer was assigned to the fifth floor of Scott and instructed not to leave unless relieved. At daybreak, thinking that the critical period had passed, all the security officials were released. A new officer came in at 6 a.m. on Thursday morning to replace the officer on the fifth floor of Scott. Then, at 8:15 on Thursday, October 30, a third fire, once again on the fifth floor of Scott Hall, set off the alarms and sprinkler system. Once again the area was flooded and students were forced to evacuate.

Upon notification of the third fire, police and Residential Living staff arrived before the fire department and found a fire burning in the bed of the RA who had reported the first fire. The sprinkler system had been activated in that room, and there was black smoke in the hallway so thick that the first responders had to crawl into the room. When they were satisfied that the RA was not in the room and after local firefighters had arrived, campus police went outside and located the RA for questioning and began preliminary interviews.

Damages for the three fires were later estimated at approximately $14,000. Although classes continued on schedule, the campus was abuzz about the fires and many students were experiencing feelings of panic. "This isn’t just a Halloween prank," student Angela Weinkle was quoted as saying. "This is my home now, and I’m scared to go to sleep."

Communication after the third fire became even more critical. The crisis communication team was once again in full gear. The overall strategy driving the response was a policy of openness and honesty. Perhaps the best example of that policy in action was Chancellor Bardo’s spontaneous interaction with the media.

- Coincidentally, on the same morning as the third fire, 46 executives and reporters from the region’s daily newspaper, the "Asheville Citizen-Times," were meeting on campus to learn more about the University and to hear Chancellor Bardo talk about the University’s unprecedented growth, its cutting-edge programs, and its role in economic development in the region. Fires and a suspected arsonist were not on the Chancellor’s speaking agenda. However, Chancellor Bardo led his remarks with infor-
mation about the fires and turned the meeting into a briefing for the press. It was a gutsy move. Executive Editor Gabordi wrote: "Frankly no one could have faulted him if he decided not to show up to speak to the newspaper people, which included more than a dozen journalists, notebooks and cameras at-the-ready. He could have easily begged off, saying he was needed to manage the crisis. A lot of people would have done that...Bardo, however, walked into that room...(and) spoke from the heart about the students and his personal and professional relationship with them...Then he answered questions in what became an impromptu press conference. In an era when many so-called leaders won't answer the telephone for fear someone may ask a question, Bardo stood up and stood out." Bardo was, indeed, "front and center."

- Shortly after his meeting with the newspaper people, the Chancellor called the first of a series of public meetings at the central gathering point on Western's campus, the Alumni Bell Tower, in order to provide an update on the situation for students, faculty, staff, and the media.

- The Associate Vice Chancellor for Public Relations spoke briefly during the noon briefing, took questions, and promised another briefing at 4:00 p.m.

- At the 4:00 p.m. briefing, the Chancellor spoke to a crowd of about 300 students, shared his

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depth concern for their situation, and reassured them everything possible was being done to ensure their safety. During the meeting, one student asked the Chancellor if he would feel safe sleeping on the fifth floor of Scott Hall. Bardo responded, "I feel strongly enough that I will stay on the fifth floor tonight. And, my wife will, too." The students responded with cheers and applause and residents of the fifth floor worked with Residential Living staff to prepare a bedroom for Dr. and Mrs. Bardo. Here is a perfect example of a CEO's actions being consistent with his words.

- As if putting his and his wife's personal safety at risk were not enough, the Chancellor next made an extraordinarily proactive decision. Certain that parents were worried about the safety of their children and sensing the need to reach out to parents, he instructed his senior staff to coordinate a phone bank to contact the family members of every student living in Scott Hall that evening. Using a script prepared by OPR, a group of volunteers, including vice chancellors, deans, department heads and faculty members, spent approximately three hours calling between 500 and 600 homes. The volunteers were instructed to call each number at least three times if no one answered on the first two attempts. The volunteer callers reported that the parents and relatives were pleased to have been contacted, and, even though it was not clear the crisis was over, they were relieved to hear that the University was doing all it could to ensure students' safety. The Chancellor recognized parents as an important stakeholder and did not rely on the media and the web to provide information, but proactively provided information to them directly.

- After the phone calls to parents, Chancellor Bardo was the featured guest on Power 90.5, the student-run campus radio station. Again, he expressed his concern for the safety of the students and his intention to prosecute the arsonist to the fullest extent of the law. He did not, of course, mention that the on-going investigation had turned up a likely suspect who was being questioned at the time.

- In a meeting with students in Scott Hall at about 10 p.m., Chancellor Bardo announced that a suspect had been identified and that an arrest was pending. The RA who had reported the first fire and whose bed was burning in the third fire had just confessed to setting the fires to an SBI investigator.

- Chancellor and Deborah Bardo then spent the night in a Scott Hall fifth-floor room as planned. The students had provided a stuffed bear on the bed for company, and reportedly, some students stood watch outside the Bardos' room that night.

- OPR then notified local media that an arrest had been made.

- The next day, Friday, October 31, at the last of three briefings at the Alumni Bell Tower, the Chancellor spoke to a small crowd of students, giving them the latest public information about the confession and the pending arrest of a stu-
dent for arson. (The RA was later convicted and sentenced to six months of house arrest, five years of probation, and ordered to pay fines and full restitution to the University and the students who had personal property damaged.)

- Chancellor Bardo also sent an email to the entire University community on Friday, October 31 announcing that charges had been brought against the student and thanking the staff and volunteers who “contributed to bringing this most difficult situation to conclusion.”

Organizational members look to the CEO for leadership in times of crisis, and Chancellor Bardo’s leadership is, indeed, a textbook example of this principle. This is a clear example of a CEO using a crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and many of the other effective crisis communication guidelines Ucelli (2002) identified. In summary, Chancellor Bardo:

- responded quickly;
- repeatedly went to the scene of the fires to listen and to reassure;
- expressed empathy and concern;
- shared his frustration and his anger;
- spoke with conviction about finding the suspected arsonist and bringing the individual to justice;
- did not sugar coat the truth;
- was open and honest with the media;
- was very much front and center;
- recognized the need for a proactive communication strategy with all stakeholders, especially with concerned parents.

Chancellor Bardo not only “talked the talk,” but he “walked the walk” — amazingly, right into the dorm room to sleep for the night. It’s no surprise students stood guard for him; he’d done it for them.

As G.A. Marken (2004) concluded: The CEO “is the only person who can set the example of how the firm will act, react and interact” with its stakeholders. In October 2003, Western Carolina University Chancellor John Bardo set a fine example. We believe other leaders and PR professionals can learn from his handling of this crisis.

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