

ACTION PLAN FOR CRISIS

The following is an Action Plan for Crisis—a series of steps that will help your organization mobilize and respond to difficult situations. It breaks the crisis down into several stages of Before, During and After, and offers concrete steps for consideration.

While this document has been inspired by the notion of controversy, there are a number of crisis situations for which this could be useful. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Natural disasters**
- **Loss of life**
- **Facility security and safety issues**
- **Sexual harassment**
- **Boycotts/demonstrations**
- **Environmental accidents**
- **Judicial action**
- **Crimes involving Board, officials, staff**
- **Financial mismanagement**
- **Civil rights**
- **Community relations problems**
- **Vandalism or theft**

In general, it is probably in your best interest to anticipate probable areas of crisis. What are the worst things that could happen to your organization? What are the most likely crises that could occur within each department? If a serious crisis were to occur today, who are the five people within the organization best equipped to handle it?

BEFORE THE CRISIS

❖ **Build coalitions and partnerships.** Effective action in the face of crises begins long before the crisis itself; it begins with effective coalition building and partnerships in the community. Every theater should align itself with key community forces, including the following:

- Your own staff.
- Other arts groups, both within the field (theater) and outside of it (museums, dance, opera, presenters, etc.)
- Individual artists
- Elected political figures
- Religious leaders and religious coalitions
- Neighborhood leaders and groups
- Education and school groups
- Chamber of Commerce and other civic groups
- Police department
- Social service agencies with compatible objectives and values
- The press, including publishers and editors, as well as reporters
- Any other key leaders in your community

Coalition building takes many forms and takes time; it also involves strong building of mutual understanding.

Part of coalition building is in honest discussion of the work you pursue; the open sharing of your objectives, aims and priorities in selecting work are key in doing the work. Equally important is in listening to your partners—understanding their aims, their objectives, etc. Gestures of investment in their interests are vital; be prepared for a lot of this work to be on a “one-to-one” basis. Some of the beginning steps are simple—open houses, free or reduced tickets, invitations to openings or other key events. Creative steps that serve the interest of the partner can be equally simple, but immensely effective. Every political figure wants access to the public: invite a key legislator (especially an undecided one) to present a big check, symbolizing your NEA or state or local arts grant, in full view of the audience on an opening night. Invite the local critic to a rehearsal. And others require more time, involving such steps as making your facility available to use by others, speaking at the Rotary Club or the Kiwanis, being more strategic in your Board recruitment and selection. The bottom line in all of this is simple: the more you can make partnerships that reflect their interests (rather than merely trying to recruit people to fulfill your own), the better off you will be; the more you invite others to share in making decisions and determining direction or action, the greater their involvement and loyalty will be. Partnerships and coalitions are most easily made around mutually held, commonly defined interests.

- ❖ **Identify key spokespeople for your institution.** Crisis or not, there should always be a clear sense of who is empowered to speak for the organization and in what situations. Make sure these people are well trained in dealing with media.
- ❖ **Keep your Board fully apprised of the implications of ALL of your work at all times.** Again, the time is too late to open a discussion about challenging work when the arts are under attack; your Board must be prepped and ready to speak with a unified voice when crisis hits. And as leaders in their respective communities, they can be our most powerful advocates.
- ❖ **Make sure you have a well developed mission statement.** The mission will ultimately be the touchstone against which the crisis and response will be measured. A crisis is not the time to discover that it is either ill-defined or ill-understood by your organization.

WHEN THE CRISIS HAPPENS (AND DON'T THINK IT WON'T)

- ❖ **Don't panic.** Too many groups find themselves in trouble simply because they responded too quickly and without sufficient thought.
- ❖ **Gather all relevant materials and information.** Check grant files, insurance forms, etc. that you may have internally; try to gather any statements, news coverage, etc., that helps you get a clear picture of exactly what the crisis is. Focus groups can be instrumental in helping you determine exactly what the issues are for your community.
- ❖ **Convene the key players in your organization and those affected by the crisis.** Board leadership, key staff and individual artists—to come up with a strategy. If at all possible, engage the services of a media-consulting group. Some may do it pro bono, others not, but it's amazing what you might find.
- ❖ **Seek legal advice.** The one acceptable situation in which you can refuse to comment is in the event of litigation. Even here, it is friendlier to say "It is our policy not to comment on litigation or legal actions" than "No comment" (which always sounds like you're hiding something).
- ❖ **Keep your staff and remainder of the Board on top of events.** Explain what the source of the crisis is and that you and key players are devising a strategy. If at all possible, give a time frame in which the strategy will be announced. All team members should have the same information and be working from the same script as the scenario changes.
- ❖ **Be clear in articulating who will be responsible for speaking for the organization** with the public and insist that everyone else defer to the spokesperson. Too much damage can be done by well-meaning (or not so well meaning) insiders, who conjecture or try to explain or give unauthorized interpretations. Make no exceptions.

At the same time, it is naïve to think that others will not be speaking with friends, spouses/partners, neighbors. It is essential that they understand the limits of their power to speak for the organization, while at the same time understanding the messages that the organization is putting forward.

ASK THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

- ❖ **Were we right? Or were we wrong? Or to what extent were we right; to which were we wrong?** All successful efforts must be based on an honest, and yet not defensive, assessment of these questions. If you are going to ask your team to defend your actions, you need to be clear about what you did that was right. If you were right, you should still ask "What would we have done differently?" Similarly, you should be prepared to admit that you were wrong if indeed you were. We are all more likely to forgive someone who says, "You know, we were wrong. We moved too quickly and took a misstep" than someone who refuses to admit any wrongdoing. Remember Nixon: defensiveness and arrogance can be the biggest enemies. Be prepared for this to be painful, but looking within is as important as looking outside. Your staff is likely to have strong feelings. This is the time they can air it; they'll be asked to walk the party line later.
- ❖ **Know what is essential to be protected.** Is it your reputation? Continued funding? Protection of people's lives? Artistic integrity? Standing in the community? Financial stability? Etc.

DEVISING A STRATEGY

- ❖ **Clearly articulate the problem.**
- ❖ **Devise two or three key messages.** No more. The more key messages you have, the more diffused the central message to your audiences will be and the more open to misinterpretation. If we can be of help here at TCG in devising these messages, call us immediately for feedback or ideas. When possible, be specific in your facts but expansive in your principles; in general, arguing content of the piece or excellence of the artist, for example, is a futile exercise, unlikely to be enough to overcome the crisis and more likely to mire you in endless finger pointing. While affirming your dedication to the artist, try to move the conversation to the right of the audience to decide for themselves, the value of having a community that encourages diverse expressions, etc.
- ❖ **Measure your key messages against your mission.** A reminder of why your organization exists and how the particular issue fits with your mission (if this is a controversy) is one of your best lines of defense.
- ❖ **Try to anticipate reactions.** Ask yourself how people will react, given your approach. How will their reactions affect the crisis? How will their reactions affect your coalitions and teams?

- ❖ **Identify your key spokespeople.** Keep the circle small; again, the more spokespeople, the greater the confusion is likely to be and the more opportunity for misinformation.
- ❖ **Assign specific responsibilities to specific individuals.** Don't inadvertently let the ball get dropped.
- ❖ **Identify specific ways in which your partners and coalition can help.** Petitions? Letters to the editor? Articles in their own publications? A signed roster of supporters in your own program? Once you begin to articulate some helpful ideas, good partners are likely to come forward with additional ideas of their own.
- ❖ **Decide on a coordinated strategy**—a press conference? A series of town meetings? A single interview with a single paper? A televised interview? Letters? Personal visits? Telephone calls? Video conference? Advertising? Internal publications/memos? Curtain speeches? (Curtain speeches are a great communication device. You have a captive audience for whom you can frame the issue; the absence of an explanation in the midst of a crisis might suggest to your audience that you have something to hide.) Faxes? E-mail? Etc.
- ❖ **Whatever your strategy, be ready to handle the media.** It's impossible to predict what they might find a "story." (A section of General Media Tips appears at the end of this plan.)
- ❖ **Determine how success or failure will be measured.** How will the team know if the crisis has been handled effectively?

BEFORE YOU RESPOND

- ❖ **Assemble a fact sheet that can be shared with any outsider.** Come up with a headline that positions you as open and responsive— "Glad You Asked" or "To Answer your Concerns" etc. You can present this as a narrative, or as a Q&A format, addressing anticipated questions. Make the direct answer in the first sentence, with elaboration (if necessary) to follow. Examples: Were people injured in the fire at the theater? Answer: No one was injured at the fire. Two people were treated for smoke inhalation, etc. Did the NEA fund this project? Answer: There is no public money being used for this project. Our 1997 grant supported outreach efforts to elderly citizens and in no way is attached to this effort, etc. This sheet should present the facts of the case from your point of view. Keep the details specific but avoid minutiae; make sure that every fact is in some way linked to one of your two or three key messages; make sure you always tell the truth.
- ❖ **Assemble your "team" for a briefing. Include the remainder of the Board and staff, your key coalition members (always including TCG by now, if not before.)** Share the results of the thinking so far and distribute written copies of your fact sheet; identify your key messages, the identity of your spokespeople, your suggestions for their involvement. Literally everyone on your staff— box office who is likely to come into contact

with the public, actors who are likely to be encountered, etc., needs to be clear on your key messages. Welcome their ideas— not only for their involvement, but for your key messages as well. Insist on your need to control the messages: you may decide that your originals are the best, but partners can be quite useful in fine tuning or in helping you prevent being sucker punched in ways you had not foreseen. If at all possible, convene this team simultaneously, minimizing leaking rumors. Given logistics, it is more probable than many will be notified by telephone or in other ways. However you contact them, make your contacts timely and immediate; coalitions can be inadvertently disrupted if partners feel they are being left "in the dark." Give them a clear timetable of your response.

NOW RESPOND

- ❖ Now and only now are you ready to respond to the greater outside world and your critics. **Follow the strategy you have devised above.**
- ❖ **Distribute your facts sheet or media alert releases.** Invite questions to the degree you are comfortable.
- ❖ **Have a fact checking process.** Identify key staff who can verify facts/allegations from the outside world, as well as staff who can provide you with concrete facts and figures you will need to respond.
- ❖ **Have one spokesperson available at all times.** Know spokesperson locations. Make sure all team members have provided home numbers, weekend numbers, mobile phones/beeper numbers, etc. Make sure the spokespeople have these numbers.
- ❖ **Touch base daily** to assess the flow of events, the power of the messages, and future steps you will need to take.
- ❖ **Establish mechanisms to collect information from your audiences.** Devise a way to centrally collect all news clippings, letters, faxes, e-mails, etc. If appropriate, survey your audiences.
- ❖ **Be patient.** These things take time and energy.
- ❖ **Take time to thank your partners** with a quick phone call or a note. All of your partners deserve a note of thanks, even if ultimately they are unable to join your efforts— at least thank them for their time in joining you to discuss the issues and hear you out. You might need them in another context that they are more comfortable with in the future!
- ❖ **Additional thanks** are due when their efforts are visible, e.g. a quotation in the press, an interview, etc. Everyone likes to know his or her efforts are making a difference.
- ❖ **Don't be afraid to ask for help or articulate your own needs.** Take a day off if you need to; better to be reenergized and ready than overextended and burned out. The offhand remark born of fatigue can do far more damage than you can imagine. Simply be clear in appointing the chain of responsibility in your absence.

AFTER IT'S OVER

- ❖ **Look backwards and assess your actions.** What did you learn? What did you do well? What could you have done better? Invite your team to share in this “post mortem.” Survey the media to determine with journalists and editors how well informed they felt. Sound out external publics as well. Record your thoughts for your own files; what may appear to be the resolution of a crisis may merely be the end of the first stage. And share your thoughts with us so that we can share your perceptions with the field.
- ❖ **Analyze how the crisis has affected the bottom line.**
- ❖ **Devise a second strategy response for the same issue.** Many controversies have flared again after the organizations believed that the crisis had passed, and this “second round” is often even more devastating. Try to articulate the issues that may not have been entirely laid to rest, or those that somehow never came up at all; devise answers for each.
- ❖ **Thank your team yet again.** A victory party at any level—even simply a bag of chips and some sodas—will go a long way to making your gratitude seem more than lip service.
- ❖ **Go back to “BEFORE THE CRISIS” and start building new coalitions** and teams: are there any that had opposed you that you might now stand to convert? And now embrace the fact that, as a member of a coalition, you need to be among the first to rally to their defense.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

- ❖ **Remember a key rule** in dealing with the press: *THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS “OFF THE RECORD.”* If you’re not willing to say it on the record, don’t say it at all.
- ❖ **Eliminate the phrase, “No comment”** from your vocabulary. It gives the impression that you’re covering up. Staff can say, “I don’t really have the authority to address that; you’ll need to speak to Mr. X or Ms. Y” is truthful and more helpful; “I cannot talk about that at this time but I will get you the information as soon as I can” or “We consider that private information” (if they ask, for example, what you are paying to key personnel) are all more helpful and open responses.
- ❖ **Do not answer questions that do not pertain to your situation.**
- ❖ **Never repeat a negative or an accusation back to a reporter.**
- ❖ **Speak in short, direct sentences.** Like it or not, we live in the era of the sound-bite. Speak carefully; the 30 second sound-bite is the general rule. Make sure that every 30 second unit is something you would want to see or hear through the media.

- ❖ **Do not debate your issue in the media.** Make your case; don’t get drawn into debate,
- ❖ **Stay calm. Never get emotional with the press.**
- ❖ **Never lie. Ever, ever, ever.** You may always respond “I do not know” or “I cannot say.”
- ❖ **Never speculate.** Reporters love to get you to answer questions about hypothetical situations. Don’t fall into the trap.
- ❖ **Control on-camera interviews by specifying locale.** A quiet place “away from the action” will convey a greater sense of calm and control.
- ❖ **Set time limits for interviews and stick to them.** Specified time limits force the reporter to focus on the most pressing issues and minimize the chances that your key messages will get lost in a shuffle.
- ❖ **Finally, correct inaccuracies.** Demand retractions/clarifications/apologies where there has been wrongful misrepresentation. Be prepared to go above the reporter’s head if necessary, but take this step only if the reporter has the information wrong and is not prepared to correct it. Remember, keeping the reporter’s good will is key to one of the coalitions you want in your community.

... AND ONE MORE FINAL, FINAL NOTE

We view this document as a work in progress. With every crisis, we are likely to learn more. Please communicate with us about the usefulness of this plan—were there unnecessary steps? Did we leave things out? How could we have been more helpful? We will be happy to distribute new documents as we continue to refine and use this plan.