

Communicating in a Crisis
RDML Craig Quigley, USNR (Ret)
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Nobody wants to be involved in a crisis. It's stressful, the outcome is uncertain, the reputation of people and organizations can hang in the balance, and the LAST thing most folks want to do is step up and be the spokesperson during such a time. But if something goes south in your Chapter or Council and you're in charge, the world will look to you for answers. Will you be ready to become the crisis communicator?

There are a variety of compelling reasons to communicate quickly, clearly and often during a crisis. Quickly because it's important to be the "first to the chalkboard" with as much information as possible. News organizations, community leaders and your Chapter/Council members will listen to whomever speaks up first, and it's important to control the narrative – or others will do it for you. Clearly because you're speaking to multiple audiences, so make sure you use plain English and not acronyms and jargon that no one will understand. Often because things change during a crisis and it's important to release the latest information upon which others can rely.

When I was the Pentagon Press Briefer I had five guidelines that I established for myself. While every press briefing was not a crisis, we had our share, and the same rules would apply.

1. Never guess. You might get it right, but if you don't, you'll never be able to correct the record in time in today's fast-moving news world. Best case scenario, people will think you don't have the facts and will look elsewhere. Worst case scenario, they'll think you're a liar and your credibility is shot.
2. Never lose your temper. Particularly important in a crisis. People want to hear from someone that is calm during times of stress. Blowing your cool might make you feel good for about five minutes, but you'll hate seeing the video of you later.
3. You know more about what's going on than anyone else in the room. So stay calm, breathe deeply and act professional.
4. Always explain why you can't answer something fully. You may be asked a perfectly fair question, but the answer just doesn't exist yet. Say that; explain that it's too early to come to a clear response and describe how and when that information might become available.
5. If you promise to get back to someone with an answer to a question, do it. Many times, I was asked a question that I simply was not prepared to answer. So, I would promise the reporter – or community leader, or DoD employee – that I would get back to them with the answer as soon as I could get it. When you do what you said you would, your credibility soars; when you don't, it crumbles.

6. Chances are good that you will never be faced with a crisis in your Chapter or Council for which you are expected to be the voice of authority and explanation. But if that day comes, will you be ready?