

LET'S TALK:

COMMUNICATION DURING TOUGH TIMES



Session Premise: You will be involved in a crisis during your career.

**When Your Team is on the Spot, Remember this Stuff:
Five Tips That Should Help**

Serious Accident Investigation Training
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When Your Team is on the Spot, Remember this Stuff: Five Tips That Should Help

Tip #1: Keep Calm

Remaining calm cannot be underestimated. Calmness and panic share one common characteristic. They are both contagious.

"Make yourself calmer than you feel, force yourself to pretend you're calm ... you'll be able to figure a way to get out, if you remain calm."

Former NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani, in an interview with CNN after 9/11

Remember, too, that you will be dealing with emotions, as well as facts. Your calm and professional demeanor will help everyone to get through.

Tip #2: As You Communicate, Always Have a Message

A message is not spin. It is not a statement to change the minds of others. A message is simply what you'd like people to remember. It must be honest and sincere.

Each team member should understand what the messages are. Messages should be used whenever you speak to an individual or group, and not reserved just for reporters.

"In the final analysis, human life is the ultimate value. Things are just things and can be replaced. Once a life is expended, it is gone, save for the continued anguish of survivors, family and friends, and in fond memories. I can only speak for myself, but I would freely give up all of my wealth and possessions to get back one single life of the wildland firefighters who died on my watch."

Jack Ward Thomas, former Forest Service chief, in answer to the charge at a congressional hearing about firefighters lacking aggressiveness.

Tip #3: Keep It Simple

Our world is a complicated one, filled with jargon. At times, we lose our ability to communicate, one with another, because we use terms and acronyms that are not understood by our audience.

"Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers."

General Colin Powell

Tip #4: Honesty is Still the Best Policy. Always Has Been, Always Will Be.

You cannot get away with being dishonest. In the age of information, too many people know too much too fast. You will get caught. You will pay a price.

Public employees are rightfully held to a higher standard of ethics. That's okay. That's the way it should be.

"Always tell the truth. That way, you don't have to remember what you said."

Mark Twain

Tip #5: Show Genuine Concern for People and their Plight

Remember, you're working in an arena of swirling emotions. If you try to eliminate or minimize the human element of a tragedy, you will not be as successful in your communications and quest for facts and straightforward opinions.

It's okay to be sympathetic and reassuring. Some people are going to need that. Maybe all of them.



A template:

- **Express your concern:** “We know that many people are hurt and having a difficult time with the events this community has experienced.”
- **Demonstrate action:** “We’re here to help identify facts and find out about what went wrong. We’ll issue a preliminary report in a week. We have all received advanced training in these kinds of investigations and we are here to help.”
- **Provide perspective:** “Working outdoors can be dangerous. But safety is non-negotiable. We hope what we do here identifies what needs to be changed so that everyone in the fire community is safer in the future.”

Serious consideration: This is not a formula. We do not reduce tragedy to that. But it is a starting point, a reliable guide that can serve you when you aren’t sure where to begin.

Bonus: Food for Thought

We’re living in a time when old media is in significant decline. New media is ascending. Consider that everyone you talk with beyond the team probably has the capability to upload and broadcast quotes, documents and photos in about two minutes.

Within ten years, it’s estimated that 80 percent of the population will get their news entirely from a handheld device. We need to change our thinking about what the media is and who reporters are.

Summary of the Session

- You need to communicate. If you don’t someone else will. Keep in touch.
- Stay calm.
- Remember, always have a purpose and a message for your communications.
- Keep it simple. Keep it honest.
- Your job as a member of the team is to find facts, but you must deal with the emotional needs and conditions of those affected by the circumstances, from family to friends to employees to the community at large.

My promise of help:

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Thanks, and best wishes that you’ll never need to use the skills you’ve learned this week.

Notes
