

The Sports Turf Manager as a Crisis Communicator

Perhaps you will never be faced with responding to a crisis. But, if you ever have an athlete get injured during play, an employee who gets hurt on the job, a disgruntled employee, a weather related disaster, or an environmental incident, you just might find yourself in the spotlight and under scrutiny.

As a manager of people, you may have to deal with an employee's death or illness, a sudden change in top management, or employee issues of sexual harassment. Each one of these can constitute a crisis. You must be prepared for that decisive moment when your response can lead the crisis to better or to worse. An initial negative perception is nearly impossible to reverse.

Crisis Communication Response Tips

- Respond within 24 hours.
- Don't point fingers.
- Always be available to the media.
- Be visible and on-site.
- Tell the absolute truth.
- Never say, "No comment."

You are judged within the first 30 seconds of speaking if you and the information you are providing is trusted. Appearing empathetic and car-

ing are the most importance characteristics you can exhibit to show "trustworthiness". Your audience will also assess your competence, your honesty and your commitment. Your goal as a communicator is to demonstrate these attributes.

It is important to recognize that the media is usually more interested in covering opposing viewpoints and that bad news and conflict are more newsworthy. Most reporters are working under a tight deadline, have limited scientific and technical knowledge and can be a bit cynical. When preparing to talk with the media, address the principal underlying concern of the audience/questioner/listener keeping your responses short and concise.

In many crisis situations it is important to bring in a third party and to tell the media whom you have contacted.

Crisis Communication Interviews

- Take control early by educating the reporter and correcting misunderstandings.
- Clarify the questions.
- Prepare two to three main messages.
- Give facts: who, what, when, where, but don't give how and why.
- Express your concern. Safety is always the top priority.
- Avoid jargon and do not use humor.
- Frame your answers in the positive.
- Tell how fast you responded, how much has been done and what you will do about it in the future.
- Thank or give appreciation to any assistance.
- Avoid words with negative connotations such as lethal, risky, deaths, maimed, toxic.
- Do not repeat the "charges" or any negatives words, such as no, not, never.
- Be conscious of your body language. Do not place your hands in a "fig leaf" in front or in back of you, but keep your hands/palms open and above the waist. Avoid touching your face, clasping or clenching your hands and pointing your fingers.

Remember these phrases.

You want to give a sense of more to come, which will help to establish your trustworthiness.

"What I can tell you is ..."

"So far, what we know is ..."

"So far, what we have done is ..."

"What we are planning to do next is ..."

"We will be able to tell you more when ..."
"I'll be glad to talk with you again after we conduct ..."

Source: Susan Santos, Ph.D., FOCUS GROUP, Medford, MA

CRISIS EXAMPLE AND RESPONSE

Situation: You have a major event that is being hosted in your stadium the next day. A set of temporary bleachers collapses and your assistant is critically injured. A reporter is at the stadium asking what happened and why, and if the event is taking place.

Your first response must show concern for the worker and his family. Your response to whether or not the event will be held the next day depends upon your management team's decision. If you are going ahead with it, you need to respond with how you are insuring fan safety. For example, "We are going ahead with the concert tomorrow; however to insure the safety of our rock fans, we will be limiting the seating to the built-in seats in the stadium grandstands and offering on-the-floor seating in the endzone."

If you are not going ahead: "We will not be holding the concert tomorrow. Fan safety is paramount and until we know why the bleachers collapsed, we will not be holding any events." ■



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aspirations within the sports turf industry, and a short essay. SAFE Scholarships are merit based and are not awarded based on need. Eligible applicants must be full time students and have at least one semester of school remaining.

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