



**Rotary Club of Kingston  
Preferred Practices  
For  
Crisis Management**

**An important note for the users**

*The attached Preferred Practices are written to enhance, and in some respects to standardize, various key activities in our club. They should be treated and used more as guidelines than as a rigid set of rules and regulations. In no way should independent thought and initiative be curbed as a result of adopting the Preferred Practices.*

*Please remember that Preferred Practices stem from our Club's combined experience in organizing activities efficiently and smoothly. If there is a doubt that a particular Preferred Practice is impractical, or it is non-functional due to a particular set of circumstances, please bring it to the attention of the person responsible for Knowledge Management or the Club President or any Board Member.*

*It is emphasized that this document merely gives guidelines to committee chairs and other Rotarians, and neither the Rotary Club of Kingston nor the persons who have written this document will be held liable in any event.*

## Rotary Club of Kingston CRISIS MANAGEMENT\*

### INTRODUCTION

Although a crisis response model needs to be developed by the Board of Directors of the Club, the Risk Management Committee recognizes the need for some guidelines to help with this process. The intent of the Risk Management Committee is to identify the elements that are important to a response plan and let the Board "fill in the blanks" as to how they wish to administer the plan. The following document speaks to the importance of developing a plan in advance and covers all identified issues that the plan should address.

One key element of the plan is that a single spokesperson be identified, as well as a back-up spokesperson in the event that the former is unavailable and unable to act in a prompt and timely fashion.

As you read the material to follow, some key points will become apparent and it's essential they be understood and recognized:-

- First of all, no club is immune to crisis;
- No one crisis is likely to ruin an organization, but a poorly managed response can;
- A history of credible service and good media relations will help;
- Develop a crisis response plan. Be like Nike - Just do it;
- Select a **single** spokesperson;
- Don't put us at odds with the media;
- Never give "off the record" comments, there is no such thing;
- Resist the temptation to offer only the response "No comment";
- Show compassion for any person who may suffer because of the situation;
- Assert your rights - you are not on trial, you're simply serving as a communicator and providing information.

If the foregoing seems a likely fit for our club, it's time to move on and learn what to do when the worst that could happen - does.

### WHEN THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN - DOES!

*Your worst nightmare as a club member has come true. You wake up one morning to learn that a child we sponsored at one of our camps drowned on a canoe trip, our inbound exchange student was in police custody, our treasurer made off with the entire proceeds of*

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\* This Preferred Practice on Crisis Management is a part of the main Risk Management document compiled for the Rotary Club of Kingston by the Risk Management Committee chaired by Rotarian John Moffat.

*the Easter Seals telethon.*

You arrive at your office and find that the media has been calling all morning... and they want answers - NOW. Before you can even begin to collect your wits, the phones start ringing again. What do you do? How do you respond?

If you're like many of us, it's only now that you wish you hadn't made that decision "not to worry about problems until they happen". In today's world of instant communications, it's an attitude that can be dangerous. That's why it's important for the Rotary Club to recognize the critical need to prepare for a crisis, even if one never occurs.

You can start by accepting the premise that a crisis can hit any organization at any time. You can run the safest, most secure Rotary Club in the country, but a lightning bolt or an automobile accident can land you face-to-face with a camera or a microphone. And while it's unlikely that only one crisis can ruin an organization, a poorly managed response to a crisis can. The long standing credibility and reputation of our club can be knocked down overnight. This reality is not a reason to panic, but it is reason to plan ahead and prepare for the crisis that, hopefully, will never occur

## **THE FOUR R'S**

When a crisis strikes, it is time to rely on the four "R's". React, Respond, Retain and Return. Never lose sight of these principles during and after the crisis. Endeavour to tackle them one at a time.

### **React**

When the crisis hits, assign troops to the battle stations. Deploy or crisis play. The faster we can react, the less damage will be done.

### **Respond**

Now it's our turn. Go on the offensive. Neutralize charges against us by honestly stating the strengths and history of our initiatives and the steps we take to guard against incidents.

### **Retain**

Do all that is necessary to retain the good name and reputation of the club. Make sure that any reporter we speak with understands what our club is about and what we have accomplished. Do all that we can do to ensure the club is portrayed in an accurate and positive light.

### **Return**

Get back to normalcy as soon as possible. The sooner we can return to "business as usual", the sooner the crisis atmosphere will dissipate. Everyone needs to know that everything is OK again. Do all we can to reassure people.

## CRISIS GUIDELINES

### **A. Start before the crisis happens**

If a crisis does happen, it is helpful if local media already know about our club, the work we do and our accomplishments. If they do, they will probably be supportive, and they may even help to contain the crisis by reporting it as "an unfortunate incident in a long history of service to the community". If however, they never hear about our club's good work, you can be sure that they will start from the beginning: What is the club all about? How is it governed? How is it funded? Is there really a need for our services?

You can see it's important to have an ongoing media relations program in place. Having a media relations program is not a substitute for having a crisis plan, however, the time to plan ahead and develop one is now, before the crisis.

*Keep in mind that some of the most damaging situations which an organization faces are the subterranean crises known as "rumours" -where something may or may not have happened, no official report has been published, yet everyone knows about "it". Make sure our plan incorporates the "four R's" for these non-occurrences as well.*

### **B. Develop a crisis plan - Now**

The first step is to form a crisis committee, composed of key Board members including the member over media relations and someone from the Risk Management committee. Once the committee is formed, it should begin to develop a detailed written plan - a series of steps to be taken and carefully and quickly followed in the event of a crisis.

Our crisis plan includes the following items:

- 1 - The crisis committee is alerted
- 2 - A spokesperson is briefed and a response is developed
- 3 - Members are briefed about the situation
- 4 - Board members are made aware of the situation
- 5 - District and RI are informed
- 6 - Major contributors, legal counsel, and insurers are informed
- 7 - Other local Rotary Clubs, and affected partners need to be informed

### **C. Select a single spokesperson**

It is preferable during a crisis that one person, and only one person, speaks for the club. This creates a feeling of honesty and consistency. The committee should select a spokesperson to serve in this capacity. The individual should be knowledgeable about the

club and its activities, a good speaker, and able to remain calm and credible under pressure. In short, we should select our most credible representative. Keep in mind that the availability of this person is critical to our goal of effective response. The President or Vice-President may be among the most logical choices.

All questions and requests for statements and interviews should be directed to the board so that they can be quickly conveyed to the spokesperson for response. The club should make sure that this rule is understood by all members who may be approached for comment. No one other than the spokesperson should offer his or her personal thoughts or opinions. The club simply cannot control its message or manage the flow of information if various individuals are allowed to comment at will, especially in the early stages of a controversy, when the facts are being gathered and a measured response is being planned.

Our spokesperson should be more than a mere voice who relays the opinions or statements of the board or the crisis committee. He or she should be actively involved in the decision-making process which leads to the formulation of the club's proactive position. It is vital that this position be determined quickly - within hours, if at all possible - because the earliest stages of a crisis are when media and public interest will be greatest.

It's for this reason that our club's carefully prepared and approved press release can provide an important baseline of information and result in response and comment consistent with the approved club position. Given the speed of communication and information transfer today, it's important you equip all key players with accurate information that allows them to understand and support our official club response in times of crisis.

It's important this release be shared with everyone involved in the operation of the club. Everyone who will have a roll to play in the event of a real crisis will need to know in advance what that role is. The reason being, having a single spokesperson in no way diminishes the importance of all key stakeholders being fully aware of the nature and tone of the approved club response. The media will be inclined to seek out and insist on obtaining responses from other Board members, as well as members in general.

#### **D. Some "Do's and Don'ts" for the Spokesperson**

Picture, if you will...it's the morning after the crisis...your phone is ringing and the media are waiting for a response. Assume for the moment that you are the spokesperson. You already have gathered as much information as you can and met with the crisis committee. You are now ready to face the media. Before you do, here are a few points to keep in mind.

The media are not out to "get you". Reporters have a job to do - to tell the story and report the news. If the story is important, they will get the facts, one way or another. Don't put

yourself at odds with the media; work with them and do everything possible to present the club's position and explain the steps the club is taking. Try to cooperate and provide the media with the information they need as quickly as possible. If you don't phone back, they may seek other sources in order to meet deadlines.

You probably will not have all of the necessary information when a crisis first hits. However, tell what you do know, acknowledge what you don't know, and offer to provide additional information. This will create an image that the club is being responsive and responsible.

Start communicating with the media as soon as possible. Return phone calls, answer questions and even advise the media of the crisis if they have not discovered it for themselves, because, in most cases they soon will. The more open you are, the less they will push for information.

Resist the temptation to offer a "No comment" response - it suggests you are trying to hide something or are afraid of the question. Saying "No comment" to reporters is like waving a red flag in front of a bull, and it sounds terrible when you are quoted in the news. "I don't know" or "We don't wish to speculate until more facts are available" are much better answers.

If you can't supply the answers, someone else will. Unfortunately, they may not be the answers you wish given. Therefore, it is important that you find the answers and fill in the blanks whenever you can. After all, the story is about our club. Isn't it better we tell it?

Another phrase that should never be used is "off the record". If you say something, you can - and probably will - be quoted. A reporter is not a buddy with whom you can share your private thoughts. If the information is not worth mentioning, don't mention it. If the information is important, state it as part of the story.

Positioning is important, and first impressions are the most lasting. The way we are first portrayed to the public will be the way we will be remembered. Will the club be viewed as cold and aloof or warm and involved? That depends largely on the image we create.

Convey the message that "We, too, are victims". Plant the thought that the club, its good name, and its excellent record of service are important to us. This helps to position the club as a victim of the incident.

Keep the problem in perspective. The club has been a vital part of the community for many years, and has made a positive difference in the lives of thousands of people. Do not lose sight of this and don't let others lose sight of it either. Keeping things in

perspective won't make the problem go away, but it will help overcome the situation as quickly as possible.

Show compassion for any who may suffer because of the situation. Express concern and describe your efforts to make amends. Our club was founded on the principle of concern for others. Don't lose sight of this now.

Be cautious about discussing legal issues. That's what lawyers are trained to do. If the situation has legal implications, know what they are, but avoid giving detailed legal answers. Also, do not try to play police officer, prosecutor, or judge. Don't talk about stiff jail sentences, heavy fines, or other penalties. The best you can do is to promise full cooperation with the proper agencies involved in the case.

Don't attempt to answer questions about other subjects that require technical training, such as science, chemistry, or engineering. Again, simply say, "I don't know. That's a question for an expert to answer".

Assert your rights. Keep in mind that you are not on trial. You are simply serving as a communicator and providing information. Your prime responsibility as a leader of the club is to operate it safely and provide for the welfare of club members. Accommodate the media, but do not compromise the club's integrity or operation.

#### **E. Working with the media**

It is important to understand and anticipate the media's needs. Prepare a news release containing your statement and a fact sheet with additional information when you encounter a group of reporters or have an announcement to make. These are valuable resources for reporters and will keep you from having to repeat the same information over and over. A couple of sample releases are included in this document. Naturally, we will want to write our own with information and detail specific to our club, our crisis.

It is also important to respect the competition for stories among reporters. Send our materials to all news organizations, or invite them all to our news conference, but don't play favourites.

#### **F. Dealing with hostile reporters**

In the process of dealing with the media, we may encounter hostile reporters. Unfortunately, we cannot ignore these people; if you do, you do so at our club's peril. Following are some tips on how to make the experience more positive.

The "machine gunner" will fire a series of questions at you. The best way to handle a situation like this is to choose to answer only one question, preferable the one that helps

you make your point. Don't feel obligated to answer more than one question at a time. If the question is important, the reporter will repeat it.

The "paraphraser" will [incorrectly] restate your views, placing them in a context which shows your position in an unfavourable light. Deal with this by patiently correcting the person and restating your case. Never let your view go stated incorrectly. Once they appear in print or on the air, it's too late.

The "interrupter" will never let you complete a thought and will try to stop you in the middle of a productive statement. Don't let it happen. There are two ways to deal with this problem. You can stop and patiently listen to the new question and say you will address that after you have made your initial point. A better way is to pause, completely ignore the question, complete your thought, and then say, "You brought up another point. What was it?"

The "hypothetical questioner" is the one who is constantly creating hypothetical situations that are designed to leave you with no way out. You are under no obligation to play this game. Simply say, "That's a hypothetical question, and I am unable to answer it".

These types of reporters are the exception to the rule. Most are trained professionals, without a personal interest in the story, who are there to do a job. Work enthusiastically with the good ones and make the best of it when you encounter the others.

## **G. Communicating with other audiences**

If you have done your job well, the media will report your story in a fair and balanced manner. But you have other audiences that need to be reached and handled in a special way: our Board, members of the club, other clubs in Kingston and the District, R.I., the people we serve as well as partnering agencies that could be affected by the incident. All of them need to be alerted when the story breaks and reassured throughout and after the crisis.

## **H. Board**

Some key Board members, as part of the crisis committee, will learn about the crisis immediately. However, the entire board should be alerted, provided with information as soon as possible, and periodically kept informed until the situation is resolved. Bear in mind that these are people who have volunteered to be responsible for the leadership of our club. They need to be well informed, especially when their club is suddenly in the spotlight.

This can be done in many ways, such as emergency Board meetings, phone calls, or letters. The method you choose will depend on the nature of the crisis.

## **I. Members**

Obviously, members need to know about a crisis situation. They have a vital role to play because they communicate with friends, colleagues, people in the neighbourhood and others. Members will have many questions regarding their responsibility and the direction of the club. Take time to keep these people informed, and be sensitive to their concerns. Make everyone feel like a member of the crisis team - informed, involved and responsible. If necessary, request outside assistance from professionals or organizations that specialize in debriefing critical incidents.

## **J. The people and organizations we serve**

The nature of the crisis will determine the form and severity of the detrimental effect it will have on this group. Leave no stone unturned to assure them of your interest, support and availability. If there have been circumstances where children of families have been traumatized, help them find appropriate professional assistance and counselling. Consider the value of bringing in independent, qualified critical incident debriefing professionals to our club. Our first and foremost reason for being is to assist those who need help and encouragement in the face of adversity. Don't fail them. Reassure this group on the issues. It is better to learn about the situation from us, and not a neighbour or from the media. You should be as open, responsive, and responsible to this group as you were with the media. They may be upset or fearful, so be sensitive. They will have questions, so be patient. They will want assurances, so give them. If we have been doing a good job all along and running a good club, this group will trust us, believe our answers, and eventually reward us with their support.

## **K. Our extended Rotary family**

The other Kingston and area clubs need to be informed. They will get questions. They may be of some assistance in the process as a resource. District and R.I. officials should be informed, as well as used as a resource.

## **L. Allied agencies and community partners**

It is always important to keep in mind that our club has developed excellent working relationships with a variety of public and private recreational and social service agencies and authorities within our community. It may work to our advantage to indicate our intention to work closely and cooperatively with them, seeking their support and participation in developing the most effective possible response to the crisis you face. If we partner with anybody, and they are partners in the crisis, work closely with them to face the crisis.

## **M. The aftermath**

After the crisis is over, sit back and evaluate how effectively the club responded to the situation. One way to do this is to ask the following question:

- How was the crisis handled?
- Were steps taken to keep the problem from happening again?
- Do we continue to enjoy the support of the Board, the loyalty of the members and the faith of our community?
- Was the club's position reported fairly in the media?

Just as tragedy cannot be avoided in our personal lives, neither can problems nor emergencies be avoided over time by an organization. But, through advanced planning and sensitive handling, a crisis can help a club grow even stronger in the long run, with little or no lasting harm to the organization.

### **PRESS RELEASES**

When a crisis occurs, you may be called upon to develop press releases designed to represent our club's position accurately and consistently to the media and to serve as a basis for your spokesperson's public pronouncements.

Though some of us function best "under fire" many would find it useful to anticipate issues with potential to become high profile and prepare outlines of media releases which could be revised by the crisis management committee and approved for use as required.

This Preferred Practice was compiled by:  
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