Crisis Averted – How Local Officials Create Calm During Emergencies

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“There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full.”

- Henry Kissinger
Hillside above Route 28 in Harmar deemed ‘stable’ day after landslide

Apocalyptic-looking sky hovers over California, Oregon amid uncontrolled wildfires

National Guard called out after police shoot Black man

COVID-19 Update: Pa. reports 1,161 new cases, 19 more deaths
Allegheny County has 4 new deaths, 73 more cases

New steps being taken to fix long-standing Route 51 flooding problem

Gas Explosion Injures One At North Fayette Assisted Living Facility
Today’s Presentation...

Is NOT about:

- Emergency management (NIMS)
- How to fund recovery efforts
- Formal emergency communication

IS about:

- Creating calm and building trust
- Exhibiting leadership under difficult circumstances
- Understanding how to “solve” for the relationship between government and constituent
Why should you take my word on any of this?

Consulting with Local Governments

Serving My Community Directly
Our goals for today:

- What type of relationship should we build in crisis?
- What does a trust-based relationship look like?
- Crisis Case Study
- Questions/Answers
What kind of relationship should we build during a crisis?
Solving for a Situation VS Solving for a Relationship
Finite and Infinite Relationships

“A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing play.”
The Finite and Infinite in Government

Finite “Games” We Play:
- Constituent Complaint
- Policy Opposition
- Neighbor Dispute
- Singular Code Enforcement

Infinite “Games” We Play:
- Tax Increases/Decreases
- Community Investments
- Labor Agreements
- Delivery of Services Generally
- Economic Development
- Public Safety & Crisis Management
Crises Require an “Infinite” Approach to Governance

- Solve for the affected and their relationship with government IN ADDITION TO solving the logistics of the crisis.
- Even finite moments in government can have infinite impacts if compounded over time.
- The only “normal” we can bank on is that another crisis will happen, so embrace the infinite approach now.
How do we build trust with constituents in crisis?*

*Adapted from Covey’s *The Speed of Trust*
Present the Situation Honestly
Present the Situation Honestly

*Straight shooting with credibility, empathy.*

- **Where We Fall Short:** The unknown can grant us an excuse to defer. We confuse concern, anger for blame.

- **Solutions:** “Here’s what we know.”
  “Here’s what we don’t know.”
  “Here’s what we are doing to learn more.”

- **Examples:** House fire
Get on the Constituent’s Level
Get on Your Constituent’s Level

Demonstrate mutuality and an extension of partnership.

• Where We Fall Short: The power dynamic is established, but moldable
  Tendency to respond with facts over empathy

• Solutions: “We” statements in place of “you” statements
  Exhibit a “listen-first” posture
  “I would be upset as well if it were me.”

• Examples: Flooded properties from a heavy rain
Prove to Be a Capable, Reputable Partner
Prove to be a Capable, Reputable Partner

**Create a trusted, communicated process towards resolution.**

- **Where We Fall Short:** We assume “being there” is enough. A lack of updates doesn’t bother us the same way. Honoring stated commitments is our job.

- **Solutions:** Over-communicate throughout the recovery. Hire/refer vendors who conduct themselves well in crisis. Create expectations with the public.

- **Example:** Bank robbery
Deliver the Goods, Prepare for Next Time
Deliver the Goods, Prepare for Next Time

Be known for completing projects as expected, creating a vision.

• Where We Fall Short: Not all crises are random, require planning
  Realizing that the next “crisis” is on the way
  “Complete the circle” to the public

• Solutions: Talk about what happened in an accessible way.
  Demonstrate a shift in priority/care.
  Check in on the affected some interval out.

• Examples: Landslide
Crisis Mitigation is equally relational as it is tactical.

- The public expects more than pure mitigation, even if they don’t explicitly as for it (as infinite games require).
- Prioritizing the relationships with constituents in crisis is tactical, purposeful work. Language, empathy, availability matter.
- The job isn’t “over” when the incident ends.
- Investments of energy and empathy in crisis can yield significant gains in trust longitudinally. There is a real bias towards remembering how you acted in crisis.
Case Study: Landslide Mitigation
The Facts

After a season of heavy rains, a landslide occurs that damages the backyards, driveways and sewer infrastructure supporting 5 homes.

- No injuries, major property damage above and below the slide.
- Emergency crews determined no immediate risk, engineering on-site.
- Sanitary smells and pooling apparent, potential for additional slide.
- History of undermining within the neighborhood in question.
Infinite-Oriented Responses

 Shay Present Situation Honestly
  ➥ Overview of geo-technical work, limitations on uses of property
  ➥ Monitor for sanitary system leaks, back-ups
  ➥ Contact insurers immediately; municipality will as well
  ➥ Expect surveyors and staff periodically

 Shay Get on Constituent’s Level
  ➥ Ask how involved they would like us to be with updates, intros
  ➥ Offer support where able, vendors who may be able to help
  ➥ Apprise them of what to expect (legal, equipment, testing)
Infinite-Oriented Responses

🔹 Be a Capable Partner
  - Introduce key staff and site personnel to home owners
  - Commit to daily updates for a time, weekly updates when appropriate
  - Share municipal measures and expenses for mutuality
  - Ask mitigation crew to be mindful of disruptions to homeowners

🔹 Deliver the Goods
  - Make budgetary commitments for future landslide events
  - Do a better-than-expected job of clean-up (finishing work)
  - Schedule a check-in with property owners months out
  - Update the public accordingly
Questions or Comments?

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