

LEADING ON LEADERSHIP

Managing a Crisis

1. Gain a full understanding of the situation

It is easy to become caught up in an emerging crisis and act before gaining a full understanding of what has happened. Indeed, the pressure will often be very great to do so because rumours may be circulating on social media, or journalists may be emailing to ask for a reaction on a tight deadline.

Pausing for long enough to gather an accurate assessment of the situation is advisable before making any public comment on any forum. Journalists are taught to ask six questions: who, what, where, why, when, and how. These are useful questions we can ask ourselves in making sure we fully understand what has happened. Doing so, enables us to answer questions confidently. 'Why' is the most important of these questions.

2. Who needs to know?

Schools have several audiences. In a crisis situation, we will certainly need to communicate with the governing body, staff, students, and parents. We may also decide to issue a press release, particularly if misinformation is circulating. This is not just a matter of ticking off a list, however, but also deciding what we say to those audiences.

Communication to parents, students, and the media has to be expressed in plain English which is free of jargon and acronyms. Watch out for ambiguities which may be misinterpreted.

Tone is important. Avoid sounding defensive. Be factual, measured, and sympathetic.

3. Other agencies

In a crisis situation, you may be working with other agencies, such as the police, your local authority, or local health services. Coordinate your communications with partner organisations. If your school is being unfairly criticised, you may be able to ask others for help. For example, you may want to contact your local councillors or MP to talk to them about the situation, and see if they would be able to provide supportive statements.

4. Avoid social media spats

We are all aware of the risks of becoming embroiled in rows on social media. Not every post needs a response. Take great care about being drawn into online disputes. If you feel that an individual is posting misinformation, message them directly inviting them to speak with you so that you have the opportunity to explain the situation to them. If misinformation is being propagated widely, you may want to respond by putting out a short post which links to a factual statement.

5. Responding to the media

If approached by the media, provide any response in writing rather than verbally. Communicate clearly and succinctly, and test your response with somebody else for a sense check. Follow your protocols. You may need to clear your response with your chair of governors, local authority, or chief executive.

Ask the journalist who approaches you for a deadline. They will probably say 'as soon as possible' but push for a rough timeframe. If you cannot provide a full response in that timeframe supply a holding comment. For example, depending on the situation, you may want to use this opportunity to express sympathy and say you are investigating the issue at hand. Avoid saying 'no comment'.

6. Broadcast interviews

You may be asked for a television or radio interview. Decide whether this would be appropriate. It would obviously be impossible to discuss a staffing matter, for example. However, you may feel that an interview would be helpful in communicating how the school has responded to a crisis.

Have in mind three key messages that you want to convey in the interview. Ask a friend or relative to help you prepare by interviewing and questioning you.

Understand the mechanics of the interview. Is it being broadcast live? What is the format; a one-to-one with a presenter; or a discussion involving another person or people? If the latter, who are the other participants, and how do you feel about that?



7. Correcting mistakes

You may feel that an article which appears in the media is incorrect. If so, contact the reporter in the first instance, and ask for a correction. If this is not forthcoming, take up the matter with the editor.

Before contacting a newspaper with a complaint, it is worth looking at the [Editors' Code of Practice](#). This lists standards which members of the press subscribing to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) have undertaken to maintain. You can make a formal complaint to IPSO. You will find information about how to do so, as well as contacts for complaints about television or radio items at www.ipso.co.uk/complain

8. Saying sorry

You will hear conflicting advice about saying sorry. There is often a view expressed that it is an admission of liability and may have legal implications. If in any doubt, take legal advice. That said, if you know that a mistake has been made, it is generally a good idea to apologise at the earliest opportunity.

9. Mitigating risks

Many issues in schools – dress codes, behaviour policies, finances, and exam results to name a few – are potential sources of controversy.

You will already have reputational risks as part of your risk register. It is worth testing decision-making carefully against those risks. A good rule of thumb is how comfortable you would feel explaining the rationale for a decision in public to an audience.

This process may occasionally cause you to review whether the decision is correct. However, in reality many decisions involve balancing competing demands, and it is likely that someone will disagree with whatever you have decided. Testing how you would explain your rationale gives you an opportunity to think about how you might articulate the balance you reached in the best interests of the whole school community.

10. Don't panic

We are probably all familiar with the timeless advice of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, which famously has the words 'Don't Panic' inscribed in large friendly letters on its cover. In a crisis, it is good advice. It can feel as though events are running out of control, and that criticism is personal and unjust.

Schools are good at establishing and following processes. Do that now; deliberately and calmly. Seek wise counsel; colleagues and governors who can support and advise. And have faith; the crisis will eventually end and your school will come through the other side.

Note: This is a [version of an article](#) which was first published in SecEd, in April 2020.

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