

WHEN BRILLIANT ENGINEERING PROJECTS GO BAD

Why engineers need to have a crisis management plan

It is every engineer's worst nightmare - when their projects become front page news for the wrong reasons.

- One person was killed after part of the roof of a newly developed underground parking area at a Pretoria mall collapses
- One more body found at a construction site in Randburg, where four workers have been trapped under tons of sand
- An Eastern Cape bridge collapses killing two people and injuring 18
- A building in Durban collapses nearly crushing 23 construction workers

"Almost everyday industrial accidents take place and in many circumstances engineers, project managers and consultants do not know how to manage the crisis from a media and a wider communications perspective," says Evan Bloom, MD of the Crisis Communications Consultancy.

The key to effective crisis management, according to Bloom, is to have a robust and flexible crisis management plan for every project undertaken.

The following eight steps form the basis of any crisis plan:

1. Identify what could go wrong

Before a project commences, a worst case scenario session needs to occur where every conceivable aspect that could go wrong is identified and recorded. This includes acts of man, nature and God.

2. Set up a crisis management team with a spokesperson

With the identified scenarios in place a crisis management team needs to be set up to deal with the potential issues. The team is made up of the heads of the various departments working on a project including legal and communication advisors. It must also have a spokesperson that is an expert on the project/s at hand and can speak to the media and the wider publics affected by a crisis like: surrounding communities, government departments and industry and professional bodies.

Crisis management team members must be allocated key roles and responsible for the crisis duration.

3. Media training

The spokesperson will be expected to communicate consistently for the duration of the crisis and needs to be intensely media trained. This includes knowing how to deliver targeted messages for radio, TV and print and how to deal with difficult reporters and questions. It is also recommended that the entire crisis management team are also media trained as a contingency should the spokesperson be in a situation where he/she can not be interviewed immediately.

4. Holding statements and collateral

For every situation that could go wrong, there needs to be a statement put together. The statements must be written in such a way that key information can be inserted and altered for immediate dissemination to the media. A company overview document and photography of the spokesperson must be kept on hand should the media request it.

5. Detailed contact lists

A list of all people directly and indirectly related to crisis management needs to be maintained including all home, work, e-mail addresses, fax and mobile numbers. This includes the crisis management team as well as external bodies in the area surrounding the project such as the police, fire department, hazmat teams, environmental consultants, traffic departments, government and parastatal bodies and the local media.

6. A physical crisis plan

The crisis plan needs to exist as a complete document in both soft and hard copy and it must be continuously updated and available to the entire crisis management team.

7. Monitor the wider environment

The crisis team must monitor the surrounding community's reaction to the project they are working on so negative perceptions can be identified and corrected. This includes comments made by the media.

8. Practice

All crisis teams need to practice regularly for all the incidences that they have identified by holding dummy crisis exercises.

Further media information:

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