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Managing Crises Means Managing Victims

Dealing with victims remains among the least well handled of all campus management activities. Here's how your institution can appropriately respond when a victim-creating incident occurs.

- by James E. Lukaszewski

The highest priority, greatest threat and most crucial aspect of managing crises is the victim dimension. Victims provide the explosive emotional drive that results in high visibility, high liability and high anxiety for campuses. The reality is most hospitals, schools and universities do a sloppy, insensitive or timid job of dealing with these individuals.



Managing victims means more than putting them into an ambulance. Responders, administrators and leaders need to know a lot more about the patterns of victim behavior.

There are many powerful reasons why managing victims is so difficult for campuses. Victim behavior is irrational, and management's obsession with tangible results over something that is clearly emotional, and by-in-large immeasurable, forces them to appear anti-victim, emotionless and cold. Furthermore, management training in ethics and managing emotional circumstances is at best minimal. As a result, administrators and law enforcement who respond with empathy and sympathy can be criticized as being soft, sentimental, even sissies.

Legal issues also make victim management a challenge. Administrators usually rely on peer and legal advice to avoid being empathetic or apologetic. As a result, they are often reluctant to promptly assume blame or responsibility.

Managers and leaders may excuse their callous behavior by saying, "We didn't want to overreact." When individuals are victimized, however, instantaneous or at least extremely prompt action is required, even if it appears to be an over-reaction later on. Failure to act is among a select list of powerful non-behaviors that cause the greatest damage and accelerate the victimization of everyone at risk.

In crises, one crucial strategic responsibility of leadership is to have in place a victim response unit and special victim action team. These teams include staff from the organization's communications department, legal department, human resources and victim management specialists. They immediately help administrators avoid both the

collateral damage and devastating consequences of mismanaging the victim dimension. They keep management focused on the significant benefits to reputation, public trust and legal liability reduction that will be achieved by the prompt, empathetic and apologetic managing of victims. These same groups need to continue victim follow up for years after a crisis.

Key Indicators of Victim Behavior

Victims' behaviors are driven by powerful emotion. After a crisis, there is anger, betrayal, disbelief, dread and fear. There is frustration, powerlessness and helplessness. There is the feeling of inadequacy and the agony of walking-but-wounded loneliness. In fact, these are the words that help identify the truly victimized.

Victims become intellectually deaf. When humans are victimized, the first thing that happens is our inner voice begins repeating over and over to us exactly what happened, how stupid we were, how careless we had to be to get into this kind of jam. Our outer voice, the one everyone can hear (most of us have the two voices; some have more) is telling everyone else about what we are suffering and who is responsible. This is what makes dealing with victims so difficult.

Victims experience instant self-absorption and focus on the problems and afflictions that being a victim causes. They hear little. They notice little, and they are primarily stimulated by additional negative information about their circumstances or similar ideas. Even sincere offers or actions to help can be interpreted as intrusions or attempts to control.

Victims are emotionally engaged 24/7. Put yourself in their place. If you are an adult, you have been victimized by something. Once it happened to you, you were consumed by it, at least for a time.

Everything is a question. Victims' inability to absorb information from the outside leads to their asking questions, sometimes repeatedly. The questions they ask might be simple and embarrassing like, "Who's responsible?" "Why did this happen to me?" "Why couldn't this have been prevented?" "Surely there must have been some alternatives that would have headed off this problem before it happened." "Who is going to pay all my bills while I suffer these problems?" "Why didn't you warn me if you knew this could happen?"

What Do Victims Need?

Victims have four powerful needs. If these four needs are met promptly – preferably by the campus – victims will more easily move through their state of victimization and be less likely to call or respond to attorneys, the media or even to call attention to themselves. The reality is that if the campus fails to meet their needs or does so only partially, victims will find ways to help themselves, often at the campus' expense in both dollars and reputation. The following is what most victims require in order to begin their personal restoration:

- 1. Validation** that they are indeed victims. This recognition is best rendered by the institution; if not, public groups, government or the news media will do it. Silence by administration or perpetrator is a toxic communication strategy.
- 2. Visibility:** a platform from which to describe their pain and warn others. Preferably, the platform should come from the campus or a credible independent organization that can help the victim explain what happened, warn others, or just talk it out while convincing others to avoid similar risks or to take appropriate preventive action.
- 3. Vindication** through action by the institution to ensure that whatever happened to the victim will be prevented from happening to others. Victims rarely sue because they are angry, their life has been changed dramatically, or because lots of plaintiff's attorneys are chasing them. Generally, victims sue because their situation is not acknowledged and their feelings are ignored, belittled or trivialized. If they are prevented from publicly discussing what happened to them in meaningful ways and no one is taking prompt constructive action to prevent similarly situated individuals, animals or living systems from suffering the same fate, victims will look to take more aggressive action.
- 4. Extreme empathy/apologies** issued directly and promptly tend to dramatically reduce victimization and virtually eliminate litigation. While the lawyers may strongly advise against any form of apology because, under law, an apology is an admission, there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that apologies, promptly and sincerely delivered, virtually eliminate the potential for litigation. This means that while the lawyer's advice needs to be considered, if the victim refuses to sue, you can quickly redeploy the lawyers to negotiating an effective settlement rather than pursue a futile effort to deny what the victim needs most. Courts prefer settlements.

Fear of Liability Can Hurt You

The greatest barrier to disclosure and appropriate victim attitude management is a campus administration's fear of liability, fostered by well-meaning but misguided counsel. Any credible way to reduce or mitigate this fear is essential to better behavior, reputation preservation and litigation reduction.

The victimized have enormous power in our society. When there are victims, set aside your inherently adversarial training and nature, and pragmatically and humanely manage the victim dimension. When you think about it, isn't this how your Mom taught you to behave?

What Does It Mean to Be a Victim?

There are three kinds of victims: people, animals and living systems. Living systems are things like estuaries, deserts, jungles, rain forests, river valleys or someone's back yard.

The fact is you can blow something up, burn something down or even negligently destroy it, but as long as no one is injured or killed, no animals are injured or killed, and no one's living system is harmed, the situation may be bad news, but it is not a crisis.

Instead, it could be a disaster or simply a bad day for someone's schedule, budget, reputation or career.

No matter how damaging an event, only a small number of individuals will actually feel victimized. This is true even in mass casualty situations. While many may be injured, disadvantaged or require extraordinary assistance, very few blame others for their feelings of helplessness, demoralization, frustration or betrayal. Most injured or wounded just suck it up, deal with it and move on with their lives.

Still, there are some who are more affected by a crisis. Whether there are wounds, bullet holes, or any other visible or invisible damage, human beings have the capacity to feel victimized. They can also feel victimized on behalf of others, like animals or other living systems.

Even when many are injured at the same time, each person suffers alone. Every person suffers differently, experiences pain and fear differently, and needs to be treated as an individual. Too often, the victimization, the sense of frustration, the sense of helplessness and being misunderstood persists because campus officials, society and even the media lump individual circumstances together too quickly. This is very frustrating to victims.

Victimhood ends when the victims, by themselves, let go of what is affecting them and get on with their lives.

Avoid These 5 Common Mistakes When Dealing With Victims

Experience shows that many schools, universities and hospitals actually make a crisis worse by engaging in a pattern of victim-creating behaviors, which end up causing most litigation. These behaviors are identifiable and preventable. Engage in any of the following, and your organization could be considered by victims to be a perpetrator.

1. Deny there is a problem: Some organizations refuse to accept that something bad has happened; or that there may be victims or others directly affected who require prompt public acknowledgement. There is denial that the crisis is serious; denial that the media or public have any real stake or interest in whatever the problem happens to be. "Let's not over-react." "Let's keep it to ourselves." "We don't need to tell the people in public affairs and public relations just yet. They'll just blab it all over." "If we don't talk, no one will know."

2. Count yourself or your institution as a victim: Even if an organization or its personnel have been injured during a crisis, the public does not perceive them to be victims. When campus administrators identify themselves as victims, they often forgive themselves for their mistakes and issue time-wasting explanations, such as "We don't deserve to be treated this badly." "Mistakes can happen, even to the best of schools." "We're only human." "We have done so much for so many. Why doesn't that count for something?"

3. Engage in “Testosterosis:” Often, campus administrators, sometimes encouraged by their attorneys, look for ways to hit back, to “slap some sense” into victims or try to discredit them, rather than deal with problems and emotional circumstances. Officials might refuse to give in; refuse to respect those who may have a difference of opinion or a legitimate issue. They react with irritation to reporters, employees, angry neighbors, whistle-blowers and victims’ families when they call asking for help, information, an explanation or an apology.

There is powerful negative energy inside the executive circle. That’s what testosterosis really is: It’s an attack of abusive adrenaline. This command and control mentality sets the stage for predictable errors, omissions and resistance to what is truly needed. The victims in these circumstances often view the institution as much a perpetrator as the individual or circumstance that caused the crisis in the first place.

4. Behave arrogantly: Institution officials are often reluctant to apologize, express concern or empathy, or to take empathetic responsibility because, “If we do that, we’ll be liable,” or, “We’ll look like sissies,” or, “We’ll set bad precedents,” or, “There’ll be copycats,” or, “We’ll legitimize bad actions or people,” or “We can’t give them what they don’t deserve.” Arrogance is contempt for adversaries, sometimes even for victims, and almost always for the news media. It is the opposite of empathy.

5. Be self centered: When the decision is made to finally make some accommodation and move toward settlement, the organization talks only about its own pain, expense and inconvenience. Or it talks about its previous good works, job creation or how much damage could be caused if the victims continue their behavior. This implies that the victims are responsible for their own situations from the beginning. This makes victims, employees, survivors and neighbors even more angry, and the media more aggressively negative, creating additional plaintiffs and accusations. Whining is never an effective tool or strategy.

James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA is chairman and CEO of the Lukaszewski Group Inc., a global crisis management firm and he can be reached at tlg@e911.com. For additional information, visit www.e911.com.

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