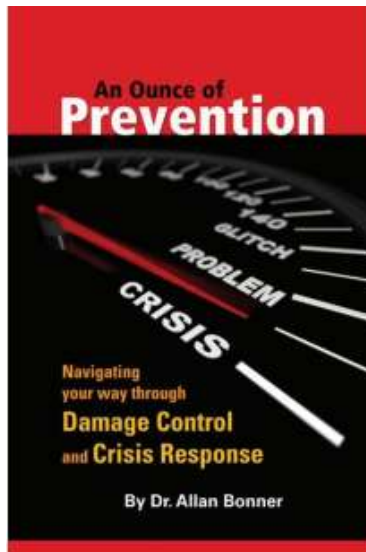




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An Ounce of Prevention
By Allan Bonner
Sextant Publishing, 316 pages

When a crisis occurs, it's too late to begin crisis communications planning. You must assume that a crisis will one day strike your company, and begin your planning in advance - and in detail. In *An Ounce of Prevention*, Toronto-based crisis management consultant Allan Bonner tells of a client involved in offshore exploration that has a deal with the nearest land-based hotel to have a conference room reserved 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If a crisis were to occur, that is where the company would meet with reporters or families of workers. The room doesn't normally sit empty; it's rented out, but with the proviso that other users might have to leave on 10 minutes notice. "When you remove all possible decisions from your actual response, you will act with more speed. You will also make better decisions, because you made them long before the event," Mr. Bonner advises. Your planning should start with these questions: What decisions can you make ahead of time? Are there stumbling blocks to decision-making - such as money, resources, and people - that you can reduce or eliminate? Who should be on the crisis management team? Who should lead that team? Should the team leader or team



composition change depending on the cause of the crisis? Can customers, suppliers or other stakeholders provide some offsite assets to help you during a crisis? Can local schools, churches and public buildings be used in a crisis? What role can your workers' homes play? Can your workers work from home? Can stockpiles of crisis-response material serve other useful purposes in normal times? Communications, of course, play a vital role in a crisis. "Your organization must not only do the right thing but be seen to be doing the right thing," Mr. Bonner says. "Poor communication often makes people think of the worst, and people who think the worst of you can make your crisis more costly." In a crisis, you want to help frame perceptions of the situation. He stresses there is no guarantee that communicating about risk will calm people. Indeed, it might do the opposite, inclining them to worry more. But given today's world, he argues the risk information is likely to get out anyways, so you want to grab at least modest control of the agenda. "The risk communicator wants first to define whether the glass of asbestos is half full or half empty and whether a survival rate of 50 per cent means you've got a good chance to live or a good chance to die," he notes.

In addition to framing, Mr. Bonner alerts us to "signals," a type of framing. You will have more trouble if your event appears to be a signal that a technology or industry isn't being well managed or you have underestimated the risk. He points out that the 1979 Three Mile Island disaster was such a signal but, unlike a problem at another nuclear plant a few months earlier, it occurred only 12 days after the release of *The China Syndrome*, so public interest and fears were aroused. Events don't happen in a vacuum and they often are intensified by the prevailing zeitgeist. So good risk and crisis managers keep an eye on popular culture, which can serve as an early-warning system of issues that might singe their organization.

Mr. Bonner recommends that your communications be based on short, positive, memorable statements, which he calls SOCKOs - an acronym for "strategic overriding communications knowledge objectives." The messages must be strategic in intent, and focused on the most important - overriding - information at hand.

You must pay attention to the type of communications you are using, notably the difference between written and oral; oral communication requires repetition, imagery, simplicity, brevity and clarity. His use of the word "knowledge" in the acronym is a reminder to include facts, figures, history and dates. Finally, your communications must have clear, measurable objectives, such as regulatory approval or a change in the negative-to-positive ratio of headlines.

And yes, you can write SOCKOs ahead of time and keep them in your crisis plan (and hope they never need to be used). *An Ounce of Prevention* will help you in all aspects of crisis management. With an accompanying DVD, it takes you step-by-step through crisis planning and what to do if one should strike. It's not only big picture, but also focuses on details, down to how to set up the desk in your public affairs room and what type of microphone to use in news conferences.

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