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THE CRISIS COUNSELOR

PR Book Proves Crisis Skills Should Top Management Priorities

Business trips give you an excellent chance to catch up on your reading since you're isolated on a plane for two to three hours. So there was no better time to review Jeff Caponigro's, *The Crisis Counselor* (Contemporary Books), a guide to managing business crises, than the round-trip flight from San Francisco to New York. I didn't know that the trip would turn out to be a business crisis that increasingly is experienced by too many business travelers.

After five hours of waiting, the airline finally found a pilot and plane that were both willing to take to "the friendly skies." At 4 a.m. I arrived at our hotel only to be told that I really didn't have a reservation despite the fact that I had a document in my hands. The reservation clerk did find me a hotel for one night after numerous calls, and for just \$350 I enjoyed an hour-and-a-half sleep and shower. On the trip back, the airline treated me to an hour of seated relaxation on the tarmac at LaGuardia as well as a scenic two hours at Denver's Stapleton Airport.

Were these the crises that Caponigro wanted to cover in his book? Probably not. But then the traveling public has come to expect this level of service. Our tolerance levels constantly have been raised to the point where it becomes a pleasurable surprise when we actually get what we pay for.

While written by a public relations professional, *The Crisis Counselor* really isn't a public relations book—it's a management book.

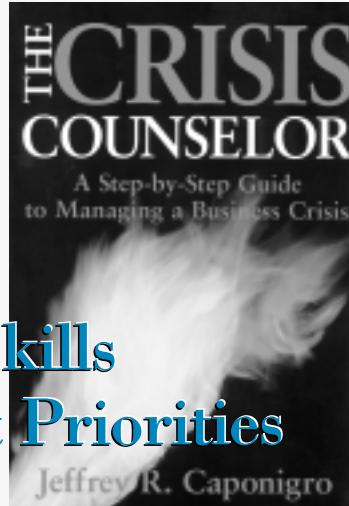
Caponigro does an excellent job of outlining how crises can develop and become major disasters in almost every business—large and small. After reading the first two chapters you quickly see that a crisis can occur over even the slightest action or decision. It would be very easy to become so depressed that you simply stay in bed and pull the covers over your head to avoid a potential crisis.

Since this is impossible, the next best thing is for management to follow Caponigro's excellent advice to identify areas of potential vulnerability and take the necessary actions to prevent potential crises.

Using real-life examples without identifying specific organizations and a very readable question and answer format, *The Crisis Counselor* clearly explains how large and small firms can plan in advance to minimize damage to the organization. Caponigro covers almost every type of problem you can imagine. Strikes, boycotts and lawsuits as well as natural and manmade disasters are well-covered to show management how they can protect the company's reputation and survival.

About 10 years ago I took up skiing. The instructor drilled me on the "proper" way to fall. By the end of the first season I had the theory and plan of action down pat.

The problem was every time I got in trouble I never fell according to "the plan." This reality vs. theory conflict is even more frustrating when it comes to protecting a firm from a crisis. Fortunately, few companies will experience a major disaster that will



cripple or destroy the firm. However, we all face a multitude of potential minor disasters every day and the best way to recover is to have a plan and use books with real-life examples as a guide.

As the author points out, most businesses today really do try to do the right thing, but disasters and crises will occur. As a result, having a good set of plans in place that are frequently reviewed and practiced can minimize the damage. In addition, the author stresses again and again that fast, accurate and clear communications can limit damage and often improve the company's image, goodwill and support.

As I noted from my personal experience, skiers seldom spill according to plan but having a plan can prevent injuries. The same is true of business crises.

A short, concise crisis plan that can be readily understood, especially in desperate situations, is more effective than one that covers every possibility.

Unfortunately, effective crisis management plans are time consuming and cumbersome to develop. In addition, these plans seldom, if ever, have an immediate effect on the bottom line, so they don't get the management attention they need and deserve—until it is too late.

But that is no reason management shouldn't develop a set of business crisis management guidelines. These same

guidelines worked effectively for Pepsi-Cola in the syringe scare, for the Tylenol crisis and for Odwala in their drink contamination crisis. The problem is that most organizations tend to want to over-document the program so it covers every possible contingency. However, after reading *The Crisis Counselor* you come to understand that your plan or guide should be designed to handle an unpredictable event. By their very nature, unpredictable events can't be prepared for, no matter how much documentation you have.

Because of this, Caponigro stresses that a short, concise crisis plan that can be readily understood, especially in desperate situations, is more effective than one that covers every possibility. As the author notes, plans are written ahead of time as a projection based on historical records and include a lot of assumptions as to what the situation will be at the time of the disaster. Few things happen as predicted and the management team that is best prepared to handle the situation is one that views things as they exist in real time.

Ninety-nine percent of the CEOs or managers who read the book will never encounter a major crisis or disaster. However, each organization will experience a number of minor events during its existence, and managers will be confronted with a number of these during their careers. The book will be an excellent guide in preparing for, understanding and dealing with these situations in a positive, proactive manner.

If you want *The Crisis Counselor* to really be effective, buy an extra copy or two and

give them to your senior management. As for me, I'm sending a copy to the president of that airline. **WQP**

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