

Hoping For The Best and Planning For The Worst

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No camp director wants to believe that a tragedy will befall our camp. A crisis serious enough to draw media attention is probably going to come under the category of “worst things that can happen at camp.” When the worst does happen, we inevitably are faced with a juggling act – Most important, we have our own stakeholders to protect and serve. That obviously means that first and foremost we take care of our campers. Second (and it better be fast!) we communicate with their parents to let them know that their children are safe. But third cometh the media, and if we’re in crisis, come they will.

At that moment we will be unprepared and distracted. We will want them to go away. They will phone, they will email, and if the crisis is exciting enough, they will show up at camp – unannounced.

Our first temptation is to say “No comment.” Resist that. It will make you look really bad. Instead, craft three key messages that you want to communicate. Why only three? Because when talking to reporters you will be so stressed that you’ll lose track of more messages. Also because they like it simple. Give them more info and it will be they who choose which of your points to include. You don’t want that. You want to control the message. Give them five messages and they’ll pick the two you least like.

The only way to control the message is to give them precisely the info you want to get out and no more. So in advance of any media encounter, you must write your three key messages. You’ll need to be ready when the media arrive, so write the three messages as soon as your campers’ safety is secured, and while you’re contacting parents. That’s how fast the media will get to you.

How to craft the three key messages? One, write them, so you’ll have something to jog your memory while you’re speaking to media. Winging it will cause errors. Two, write the three points in descending order or priority. I would always make point one some form of reassurance about the present safety of all our campers. Point two might be about the future safety of all our campers. And point three should be about what we are pro-actively doing to fix the problem we were having.

No matter what questions the reporters ask you, answer with one of those three points. Say nothing else. Repeat them if necessary. Don’t say anything else. Don’t say anything you didn’t plan to say. They will try to trick you into doing that, but don’t let them. Your job is to stay in control of the interview, so that your camp comes out smelling like roses on the national news.