

When

TRAGEDY

**Strikes Your Unit
(and It Will) . . .**



**How Do You
Prepare?**

**By The Thirtymile Fire
Accident Investigation
Communications Team**





Thirtymile Fire Vicinity Maps



“Whereas public relations practitioners typically cannot predict a specific disaster or crisis, they can anticipate that the unexpected will occur.”

—From Effective Public Relations

(Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 1985)

When Tragedy Strikes Your Unit (and It Will) . . . How Do You Prepare?

Introduction

The title is not meant to be fatalistic. It’s a sad reality. At some point in your career as a public affairs officer, incident information officer, or communications professional, you will be faced with communicating about a tragedy that has occurred on your unit. You may also be part of a communications team tasked to announce the results of an accident investigation team report. Regardless of the circumstances, there are some basic steps to ensure that you are prepared for the inevitable.

Setting the Stage

The following information is based on the collective experiences of the Thirtymile Fire Accident Investigation Communications Team (hereafter referred to as the Investigation Communications Team). The Investigation Communications Team was formed to announce the Accident Investigation Team’s findings on the Thirtymile Fire, which killed four USDA Forest Service firefighters on July 10, 2001, after they became entrapped and their fire shelter deployment site was burned over in the Chewuch River Canyon, about 30 miles north of Winthrop, Washington.

It focuses on lessons learned after the fatalities occurred and leading up to the release of the findings and recommendations from the Accident Investigation Team and Board of Review for the Thirtymile Fire.

The Investigation Communications Team was closely tied to the Accident Investigation Team. On July 11, Ron DeHart was assigned responsibility as the Public Affairs Officer with the Accident Investigation Team, a role he

continued to assume (while also heading up the Investigation Communications Team) through the announcement of the Accident Investigation Team's findings on September 26, 2001. The Investigation Communications Team was not an extension of the Forest Fire Information Team, headed by Paul Hart, or the Northwest Coordination Center (Portland), although communications was coordinated with both. The Forest Fire Information Team answered media inquiries at the forest level and addressed communication needs of the victims' families, survivors, and the local community during the fire's aftermath.

On August 10, 2001, the USDA Forest Service Chief commissioned the Investigation Communications Team to develop a strategic communication plan for the release of the Accident Investigation Team's and Board of Review's recommendations and action plans. You will find lessons learned throughout the remainder of this booklet based on the experiences of the Investigation Communications Team. Some of the team's actions and decisions were successful while others required constant improvement and monitoring. Perhaps you have ideas on how to improve upon the strategies the team implemented. The Investigation Communications Team developed this document for the communication professionals and incident information officers who may volunteer for an assignment of the national importance of the Thirtymile Fire Investigation.

This document augments but *does not* replace information presented in "Introduction to Incident Information (S-203)" and "Advanced Incident Information (S-403)." Those courses are invaluable for learning more about incident information and crisis communication. You can also find additional references on crisis communication and planning at the end of this publication.

Lessons Learned

Making the Transition

Making the transition from public affairs officer or incident information officer to an accident investigation communications team member after an incident has occurred is critical to the success of the communications team. You will be required to focus your total attention on the communications team and its functions. This is your new assignment and to make your transition smoother, a few basic planning steps can be taken.

At the very onset of your assignment, obtain a charter and/or delegation of authority/authorization letter from the leadership of your organization. The charter should clearly define “exactly” who has immediate oversight authority over the team; the chain of command; and who makes the final decisions regarding any team request, activity, product, or funding and personnel needs.

Secure a job code for travel, salaries, and administrative and logistical support. Without this code, the first meeting of the team cannot occur unless personnel are prepared to travel under their unit authorization code.

The Accident Investigation Team received their charter and delegation of authority from the Chief of the USDA Forest Service within 24 hours of the incident. In contrast, the Investigation Communications Team obtained its charter approximately 1 month after the team was formed. This lapse in time and the fact that the charter omitted a chain of command and delegation of authority made it challenging for the Investigation Communications Team to function most effectively.

By having a charter and funding source, your supervisor will be more supportive of your participation on the team and the transition to your temporary assignment will be less stressful.

Forming a Communications Team

When forming a communications team to address the post-crisis situation, consider team composition including technical and interpersonal skills, availability and flexibility of team members, team size, and organizational knowledge (i.e., professional networks).

Closely examine the role, as well as the products produced from the communications team (i.e., presentations, word processing, graphics, web design, etc.) so that personnel with the appropriate skills are recruited. For example, if a press conference is warranted, identify a person with technical expertise and media relations experience.

The team should consider recruiting extended team members such as legislative, leadership, and communication contacts in the agencies' headquarters, personnel

at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), field public affairs officers, and family and unit liaisons. The most critical function these “ex-officio” team members serve is networking with key audiences in which the communications team may not have direct contact.

It is crucial that the team select one member who can serve as a liaison to the unit where the incident occurred. The person must be credible, understand the importance of communicating honestly and openly with the unit, and keep the unit leadership informed. Having an extensive network of professional contacts also enhances this person’s ability to meet the needs of the local unit.

Communicating details of a tragedy is stressful. Team members need to remain “remotely compassionate” and consider the emotion of the tragedy, especially at the field level. However, team members must keep themselves sufficiently removed from that emotion to accomplish their mission. Processes, due dates, or pressures from the media, politics, or demanding agency officials, must not intimidate them. Most importantly, team members must have a sense of humor.

Because of the intense nature of the assignment, the team must work well together. They become family for a brief period of time. Interpersonal skills are required especially when clear, open, and candid communication is essential.

Although potential team members sometimes appear to have little flexibility for accepting an extended assignment, do not omit these persons from consideration for your team. Sick leave, vacation, previously scheduled work assignments, and other critical incidents can be readily accommodated. Nevertheless, once assigned, members must be committed to completing the project.

The Investigation Communications Team had several extended team members including a unit, family, legislative, Washington Office, and NIFC liaison. In particular, the unit liaison was instrumental in forming a positive working relationship between the Investigation Communications Team and Forest Fire Information Team. The Investigation Communications Team also had contracting, press conference, graphic, and web expertise. The networking and technical support that extended team members provided helped the core team focus on its mission, which made the Investigation Communications Team a more effective and cohesive group.

After careful analysis of the communication needs, several subteams may be formed depending on the nature of the incident. Consequently, roles and responsibilities of each team and subteam members need to be defined.

Getting Started

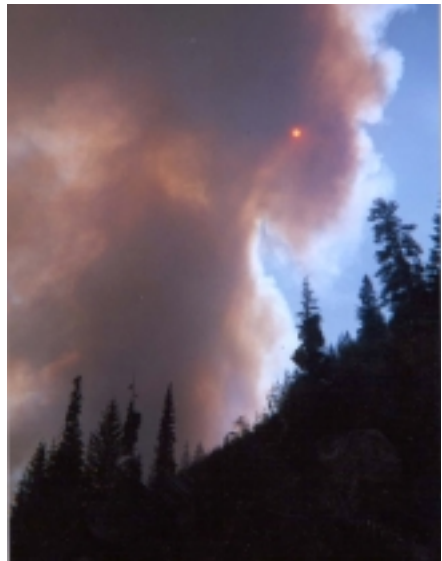
Once the team is formed, clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the team members and teams so that each team and team member can be successful.

The roles and responsibilities should be documented in writing, and agreed to by all, with the understanding that flexibility is the key. The team members should be such that in the absence of one member, others can fill the assigned role at any given moment.

Confidentiality is a must. The team can discuss things with each other but not with people outside the team.

If there are subteams, and more than likely there will be, the teams need to decide how they will interface with each other as well as with agency leadership, the agency's Office of Communication, the Accident Investigation Team, the Board of Review, and extended team members. Teams have to understand the needs of each key player and voice their needs clearly.

Appoint a media spokesperson and ensure that team members understand this is the only person authorized to speak to the media. Identify a backup in case the media contact is unavailable for comment. The Accident Investigation Team leader may choose to appoint a spokesperson for the investigation team. In this case, at a minimum the two media contacts should keep each other informed of media interviews and exchanges and coordinate interviews and key messages.





Explain in the charter, or delegation of authority letter, the approval process for products such as briefing papers, press releases, etc. This process may involve the Office of General Counsel and consideration under the Freedom of Information Act. Be prepared for a lengthy review process and knowledgeable of all parties that need to be consulted. Understanding the investigative

process will also provide team members with timeframes, chains of command, and the relationships among the communications team(s), the Accident Investigation Team, and the Board of Review.

When getting started with the communications team assignments and defining roles and responsibilities, an important logistical question needs to be addressed—Where does the team set up their operations? Although this may seem like a small detail, the location of the team operations needs to be accessible to the unit where the incident occurred, yet removed enough so that the team can maintain their objectivity and autonomy.

The first day the Investigation Communications Team met, they reviewed the details leading to the fatalities and proceeded to define areas of responsibility for each team member. From the start, team members were clear as to the role they would play. The Investigation Communications Team then identified extended team members, contacted them, and explained their supporting role. When necessary, different teams met and clarified roles and boundaries.

With the team in place, roles and responsibilities clearly defined, and expectations understood, it's time to carry out the charter and mission of the team.

Strategic Communication Planning

The team's purpose is no doubt to ensure clear, timely, and accurate communication of the findings of the Accident Investigation Team and Board of Review. To do so, a strategic plan is required, which includes further defining of the communication goals and strategies, identifying key audiences, and developing timelines and review processes.

Regardless of the strategic communication format you select, the plan should, at a minimum, include goals and objectives, key audiences, key messages, timelines and products, special needs, an action plan with responsible parties identified, and evaluation methods. Reflect full disclosure in the goals and objectives as humanly and legally as possible. This is vital for maintaining team integrity within the agency as well as outside. Do not give in to spin or politics.

The team must constantly be involved in environmental sensing, which is a dynamic process. This includes issue management, political sensing, coordination with political liaisons, and issue monitoring in the local area, the region, the Nation, and the world that may impact your team's decisions and plans. As new issues arise, the communications team must be flexible and adapt the strategic plan accordingly.

It is critical that the communications team has access to draft investigative documents early on to gather facts to complete the communication plan. You must demonstrate your ability to keep information confidential, thus ensuring future communications teams are allowed access to sensitive draft documents.

When your communications team decides to develop products, ensure that they are accessible to everyone, realizing that technology varies widely. Keep files small enough to transfer via e-mail and load and download from the Internet. If you are using Adobe Acrobat files, use the oldest version available. Finally, if holding a press conference, ensure that the satellite uplinks can be accessed by a majority of people, consider any special accessibility needs (e.g., sign language interpretation, and open and closed captioning).

Include a strong evaluation element and measures of success so that you know when and if you have achieved success.

In formulating your communication plan and timelines make sure you have covered all the bases. Retrenching or retracting premature or ill-



prepared statements is difficult for the families and survivors and compromises the credibility of your team and the agency.

Although the Investigation Communications Team initiated the strategic communication plan at the first meeting, it was finally completed the day the report was released. Over the 7 weeks prior to the announcement date, the plan was changed, modified, and adapted based on new information derived from the environmental sensing process. The goals and objectives of the plan assisted the team in completing questions and answers, briefing papers, and other product development.

The date of the press conference changed twice to accommodate the needs of the Accident Investigation Team and the Investigation Communications Team. Special consideration was given to the terrorists' attacks on September 11, 2001. The communications team did not want the agency to be perceived as delaying the press conference due to this national tragedy nor did the team want to be insensitive to the needs of the families and survivors. In the end, the date did not change a third time.

Although the communications team's plan could have been simplified somewhat, it provided a much needed structure and overall framework for the team to operate. It is important for team members to agree upon a format at the very beginning of the strategic communications planning process and stick to it.

Announcement of the Findings

Depending on the incident at hand and the strategic plan devised by the communications team, at a minimum, the Accident Investigation Team will release a report. Despite all the communications team's best planning, anticipate last minute changes.

Realize that as the release date approaches, your team will receive the help the group requested several weeks ago when the team was first formed. You will receive more input in the 24-48 hours leading up to the release of a report than you ever dreamed possible. The team will also be questioned about most everything you have done or have considered up to this point. Do not take these questions personally. This is the time to exercise the utmost in patience and tolerance.

During the days leading up to the release, the team and subteams must have already decided the roles of each member, the roles of the various extended team members, and the roles of well-meaning people who appear at the last minute to assist. Flexibility is key.

If a press conference is the venue for releasing a report, conduct a simulated press conference prior to the actual conference. All people with a speaking role at the press conference, including agency leadership, should be involved in at least one dry run. The primary speaker may need additional practice. Hold the simulations in the room where the press conference or event will be held to test acoustics, podium height for speakers, placement of visuals, and the need for props. After the press conference, hold a debriefing to review the conference to capture the successes and areas in need of improvement.

The Investigation Communications Team completed two press conference simulations with the main speaker. After the second practice run, the speaker was prepared to deliver the results succinctly and incorporate answers to many of the questions the team anticipated reporters would ask. During the simulation and less than 24 hours prior to the conference, the Investigation Communications Team decided that they needed two foam-core boards to better relay the report findings.

While setting up for the press conference, provide risers for cameras and adequate aisles, and be aware of accessibility concerns, camera angles, and objects behind the speakers such as lights, microphones, satellite trucks, and audio and video breakout boxes.

A day prior to the press conference, the Investigation Communications Team and the Forest Fire Information Team met to discuss roles and responsibilities during and after the press conference. The meeting was a culmination of multiple exchanges between the two teams so it wasn't the first time they had talked. There were no surprises and both groups clearly understood their various needs and expectations.

Environmental sensing immediately before and after the release of any report is critical. By identifying issues that may influence key messages, details in a press release, or the availability of certain personnel, the team can adapt quickly and with ease. Remember that your top priority is to consider the needs of the families and survivors involved.

Evaluation of the Communications Team

Evaluation of the Investigation Communications Team from its conception to disbandment was key to its success. Do not wait until the end to evaluate the team's activities. The Investigation Communications Team accomplished the basic goals and objectives outlined in the communication plan, which included the families being briefed prior to the media and general public, no major leaks of information, and the main speaker at the press conference being well-prepared minimizing questions from the media.

Lessons Learned

Here is a summary of the lessons learned by the Investigation Communications Team:

- * Obtain a charter and delegation of authority
- * Secure a job code for travel and salary
- * Consider team composition carefully and the need for subteams and extended team members
- * Define roles and responsibilities of the team and subteams
- * Develop a strategic communication plan
- * Anticipate last minute changes on the day reports or announcements are made
- * Conduct a simulated press conference if your communication plan calls for one
- * Continue environmental sensing from the beginning to the end of the communications team's existence

Summary

The success of this Investigation Communications Team can be attributed to:

Planning—The team had a charter; possessed a diverse repertoire of skills, knowledge, and experience; understood their roles and responsibilities; and practiced the final presentations for the press conference.

Flexibility helped with shifts in roles and transitions, changes in announcement dates and team members' schedules, and product development.

Being there—Team members persevered throughout the entire process.

What Are the Challenges for the Future?

It is a challenge to plan for the future and the inevitable. Nevertheless, each unit should have an up-to-date crisis communication plan that outlines who, what, when, and where to prepare for a tragedy. An example unit plan is listed in the reference section of this publication. In addition to having a plan in place, personnel must be committed to staffing critical incidents.

The pool of agency communications personnel who have been part of critical incident communication efforts such as Thirtymile, South Canyon, Dude, and Guide Fires is extremely small. In fact, many of these people are approaching retirement age, leaving a gap in experience and the institutional memory that is key to professionally and successfully addressing these crises. It is incumbent upon supervisors to mentor and support communication professionals and for public affairs officers and incident information officers to volunteer for these types of assignments.

A Final Word

And finally a word about next time, because there will be one some time in the future. It is critical that teams such as these be staffed with highly skilled incident information officers, public affairs officers, communication professionals, and technical/subject-matter experts. The victims, families, and survivors deserve the time and attention of dedicated professionals who will keep their interests in mind.



References

Ken Palmrose, Crisis Communication Plan for Region 3,
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/fire/fireinfo/nicc2001/> click on the
“NICC agenda” link and scroll to “[The Roll-Out of Thirtymile Fire
Accident Investigation Report](#)”

Cutlip, S.M., Center, A.H., and Broom, G.M. 1985. *Effective Public
Relations* (6th ed.). Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Whitlock, Chuck. 2000. *Accident Investigation Guide, 2001 Edition*. USDA
Forest Service Technology and Development Program.
Missoula, Mont. 7E72H46-Accident Investigation Guide.

***Crisis Communication References suggested by the Public Relations
Society of America. <<http://www.prsa.org>>***

Item # 6H-0003 *Profolio: Crisis Planning & Management*
Member \$25.00, Nonmember \$50.00. Length 78 pgs

Item # 6F-0025 *You'd Better Have a Hose if You Want to Put Out the Fire*
Rene A. Henry. 2000. Gollywobbler Productions. Member \$21.20, Non-
member \$24.95. Length 320 pgs

Item # 6F-0049 *The Crisis Counselor*
Jeffrey R Caponigro. 1998. Barker Business Books. Member \$14.40, Non-
member \$16.95

Item # 6F-0018 *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*
Kathleen Fearn-Banks. 1996. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Member \$27.65,
Nonmember \$32.50. Length 330pgs

Item # 6F-0030 *The Crisis Manager: Facing Risk and Responsibility*
Otto Lerbinger. 1997. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Member \$30.60,
Nonmember \$36.00.Length 393pgs

Thirtymile Fire Accident Investigation Communications Team Members

Team Leader, Ron DeHart, Public Affairs Officer, USDA Forest Service, Mt. Baker-Snoqualime National Forest, Seattle, Washington
Deputy, Ken Palmrose (retired), Regional Media Officer, USDA Forest Service, Region 3, Phoenix, Arizona

Members

Cathie Schmidlin, Public Affairs Officer, USDA Forest Service, Kaibab National Forest, Williams, Arizona

Terri Gates, Public Affairs Officer, USDA Forest Service, Deschutes National Forest, Bend, Oregon

Jim Paxon, District Ranger, USDA Forest Service, Black Range Ranger District, Gila National Forest, Truth or Consequences, New Mexico

Dave Steinke, Public Affairs Officer, USDA Forest Service, Regional Office, Rocky Mountain Region

Jennifer Plyler, Public Affairs Officer, USDA Forest Service, National Headquarters, Washington, DC

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

