



Everyday Ethics for Local Officials

A Leader's Role When Tragedy Strikes

April 2010

QUESTION

This column frequently addresses core ethical values — trust, respect, responsibility, loyalty, fairness and compassion. I have a question about compassion and responsibility.

*Our community just went through a harrowing experience: a group of our young people were the innocent victims of a violent crime. As a community leader, I found myself uncertain about what to do. Yet people seemed to look to me and other leaders to do **something**. In such situations, what are my responsibilities as a responsible and compassionate community leader?*

ANSWER

You are describing a community in crisis. An extremely helpful publication for leaders on communicating in a crisis, *Crisis & Emergency Risk Communications by Leaders for Leaders* (available at www.bt.cdc.gov/cerc/pdf/leaders.pdf), analyzes the experiences of federal, state and local government leaders in responding to many kinds of community crises.

This column draws heavily on that publication, which we call the CERC guide. If this topic interests you, it's well worth reading the entire publication (also available as a resource at www.ca-ilg.org/tragedy).

According to the CERC guide, in a crisis the public wants a number of things from its leaders, including:

- Empathy;
- Prompt, reliable and trustworthy information; and
- A plan of action.¹

Thanks to Our Supporter

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Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand what someone else is feeling. As the CERC guide notes, empathy does not necessarily require that you feel the same emotion, but it does require that you relate to both those who lost loved ones as well as those who fear for their own and their loved ones' safety.

Experts advise leaders to express empathy right away. Your community needs to hear that you understand what they are going through. This includes acknowledging people's fears.

It's natural to want to reassure people and to remove the sources of fear and anxiety. The CERC guide strongly discourages leaders from simply trying to reassure people that there's nothing to worry about or fear.³ Empathy involves acknowledging those feelings and, if appropriate, dealing with them.

For example, you may have information that suggests the threat of harm has indeed passed. If you believe this, help people in your community reach the same conclusion — share with them the information that convinced you.⁴

Although grief is a universal emotion, no two people experience it in exactly the same way.⁵ As a result, it can be tricky to communicate empathy by saying, in essence, you know how someone feels (for example, by equating your experience to their experience). If someone doesn't agree that the experiences equate, such an approach can be inadvertently counterproductive. Instead, focus on what you think the universal reaction to such a terrible event is. Also, *listen* to understand what people are experiencing. This is the primary goal when meeting with victims of loss. Accept moments of silence and understand that some 90 percent of communication is nonverbal.⁶ The CERC guide also notes that *how* something is said can be more important than *what* is said.

Prompt, Reliable and Trustworthy Information

The public wants to make well-informed choices about how to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. Research indicates that any reliable information is empowering and uncertainty is more difficult to cope with than knowing a bad thing.⁷

If your agency is involved with catching the perpetrators in your particular situation, explain what's being done to achieve that objective — without sharing information that might undermine that goal. Examples include:

- “Here's what we know and can share.”
- “This is what we're doing to get answers to the questions we don't yet have answers to.”
- “Here's where we need your help with getting more information.”
- “There are the steps you can take to keep your family safe.”

It's also important that only *reliable* information be shared — this is essential for your and your agency's credibility. Emphasize your interest in giving accurate information to the public. Explain what you're doing to get correct information and that you will provide updates as more is known.

The CERC guide shares the story of the Washington, D.C., sniper attacks, which resulted in enormous widespread fear and not a great deal of information for local officials to share. Officials offered tips on recognizing signs of mental illness and being a good witness.⁸ This helped empower the community to be part of the law enforcement team's eyes and ears. With respect to credibility, it's important not to make promises that you cannot be confident will be kept. Instead of promising that the perpetrators of the violence will be brought to justice, explain that your agency is doing everything it can to catch them.⁹

The CERC guide offers a number of other helpful tips, including:

- In a crisis, people are starved for information. They (and this includes the media) will seek that information anywhere they can find it. Be forthright about what you know, acknowledge what you don't know and explain what you're doing to get more information.¹⁰
- Help the media report knowledgeably on the event.¹¹ Engage experts who can serve as accurate sources for background information on what happened and help put the information in context.
- Include communications planning as well as logistical planning as part of disaster preparedness efforts.¹²
- Don't confuse the media with your audience. Your audience is the community members who are feeling frightened, confused and possibly angry. React to them and not the media that serves as the intermediary for your communications.¹³ Picture your ultimate audience before you begin speaking.¹⁴

Tips on Handling Public Meetings After a Tragedy

The CERC guide is fairly direct on this issue: If you are a public official, you owe your community the opportunity to meet with you. The guide also emphasizes that your goal in having such a meeting is not to offer solutions but to help the community discover its own solutions. Here are a few tips on successfully conducting a meeting of this type.

Let people talk. Have experts and public officials there as resources, but don't let them dominate the meeting.

Ask questions. What you think the issues are may not in fact be what's bothering people.

Treat everyone's input with respect.

Tell the truth. Admit when you don't know something, and commit to following up to get the information that attendees are seeking.

Understand the source of people's emotions. They may feel hurt, threatened by risks they can't control, ignored or disrespected. Even if these feelings manifest in angry and disrespectful comments, do your absolute best to be understanding and not respond in kind.²¹

For more tips on dealing with emotional audiences, see the October 2009 installment of this column, "Dealing with Emotional Audiences" (at www.westerncity.com under "Columns" and "Everyday Ethics").

The CERC guide also points out that in terms of trust and confidence, it's especially important for the public to know that all leaders are working together as a team in difficult situations. The media and the public quickly pick up on people who are trying to use a crisis for self-advancement.¹⁵ The guide notes that speaking disparagingly of someone, assigning blame or passing the buck all tend to be unbecoming.¹⁶ If something needs to be criticized, attack the problem and not a person or organization.¹⁷

A Plan of Action

According to the CERC guide, the **number one goal in a crisis is to counteract feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.**¹⁸ The way to do this is to set people on a course of action. The guide says, "As much as possible, give [people] relevant things to do: things that are constructive and relate to the crisis they are facing. Anxiety is reduced by action and a restored sense of control."¹⁹

The actions can be symbolic (put up the flag or another display of community solidarity) or preparatory (donate blood or create a family check-in plan).

The actions can also involve honoring the lives that were lost. This can be something the community does together to help support the families of those most directly affected by the loss. It can be very comforting for family members to know that others appreciated a lost loved one's special qualities and contributions. It won't stop the pain of the loss, but finding ways to demonstrate that the lost lives mattered can help.

The City of Fairfield applied this concept when the community lost two advocates for youth engagement, Matt Garcia and Frank Kardos, in the same month. Council Member Garcia had been, at age 21, one of the youngest elected officials in

Culturally Appropriate Responses

Just as no two people experience grief in the same way, it's also important to keep in mind that people react to and recover from tragedies within the context of their individual life experiences, values and culture. They will react differently to gestures (such a physical touch and expressions of caring that have religious overtones, like "I am praying for you"). They also may have a different sense of what information is private.

Listening is perhaps the most important element of responding to a community and people who have suffered a loss. Part of that listening may involve securing translation services so people are communicating in the same language.

Another part of that listening may involve seeking out not only individuals, but civic associations and social clubs, neighborhood groups, faith-based organizations and interfaith groups, service clubs, health care and social service providers, and other kinds of nonprofit organizations. Some questions to ask may include:

- Tell us what you see as the issues in helping the community respond to and recover from this tragedy?
- What are your thoughts on how to address those issues?
- How can we best honor the memories of those we lost?

The CERC guide notes that it is important to be realistic in dealing with potential stakeholders and stakeholder groups — there will be those who want to help, those who are adversarial and those who are ambivalent.²² The key is to anticipate the needs and reactions of all three groups so you can address them.

California and a champion of youth engagement issues. Council Members Frank Kardos and John Mraz shared this commitment, leading a local push to create a Police Activities League that would provide a safe space for teens after school.

Tragedy struck the community in early September 2008 when Council Member Garcia was shot and killed. The loss was compounded when Council Member Kardos passed away a few weeks later.

The council decided to honor their colleagues' legacies by redoubling efforts to fund the youth center. Mayor Harry Price explains the process this way, "The youth center was to be named after Billy G. Yarbrough, a long-time Fairfield resident and business owner who had dedicated his life, including his time and fortune, to city youth. In a profound gesture that began the community healing process, the Yarbrough family requested the youth center be renamed the Matt Garcia Youth Center. The community now had an outlet to turn grief into healing. Donations for the youth center began pouring in."

Mayor Price notes that the tragic events of 2008 have led to a legacy of support for community youth and given them a positive place to learn and grow — a fitting tribute to the leaders that the community lost.

Other ways to honor the memories of those lost include flying flags at half mast, adopting resolutions honoring the contributions that people made to the community (or their schoolmates), and writing newspaper or blog articles that pay tribute to the kind of people they were. Physical memorials, such as planting a tree or dedicating a particular piece of playground or other equipment, can also be meaningful. And attending any memorial services the family invites you to is another very important gesture.

For many people struggling to cope with losing a loved one, it can be helpful to know that the loved one's life mattered not only to the family but also to the larger community. While there is nothing you can do to make the pain go away — and it's important to recognize that — such actions make those grieving most deeply feel a little less alone.

Find Practical Tips Online

For more information, including tips on handling public meetings after a tragedy, developing culturally appropriate responses and what to do in cases where the agency bears some responsibility for the tragedy, see the online version of this article at www.westerncity.com.

This piece originally ran in *Western City Magazine* and is a

What If the Agency Bears Some Responsibility?

It's always okay to say that one is sorry that something happened (what the CERC guide describes as being "regretful as opposed to defensive"²³). This is not the same as admitting responsibility. For a discussion of the ethical issues that arise in such a situation (including whether it is ethical for an elected official to admit liability unilaterally and commit his or her agency's taxpayers to pay the tab for an injury), visit www.ca-ilg.org/sayingyouaresorry. That piece also examines the issue of whether taking steps to address the immediate needs of a victim can decrease the victim's likelihood of suing.

service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) Ethics Project, which offers resources on public service ethics for local officials. For more information, visit www.ca-ilg.org/trust.

Endnotes:

¹More completely, the *CERC guide* lists five things the public seeks: 1) information to protect themselves, their families and pets from danger, 2) to make well-informed decisions, 3) to have an active, participatory role in response and recovery, 4) to evaluate the use of public and donated resources, and 5) to recover or preserve well-being and normalcy. See page 4. The guide also provides advice in the form of five “don’ts” and another five “do’s.” See pages 5-8 (“Five Communications Failures that Kill Operational Success”) and pages 9-12 (“Five Communications Steps for Success”). See also tips on page 20 (“First Message in a Crisis”)

² *CERC Guide*, pages 10-11.

³ *CERC Guide*, page 7 and page 12 (“reality check” box).

⁴ *CERC Guide*, page 7.

⁵ *CERC Guide*, page 37.

⁶ *CERC Guide*, page 37.

⁷ *CERC Guide*, page 11.

⁸ *CERC Guide*, page 23 (sidebar).

⁹ *CERC Guide*, page 15.

¹⁰ *CERC Guide*, page 31.

¹¹ *CERC Guide*, page 28.

¹² *CERC Guide*, pages 4-5 (public perception of an organization’s effectiveness turns on speed of information; leaders frequently find that more time is spent on communications issues than logistical issues), 9 (a communications plan is just as important as a logistical plan) and 24-5 (elements of crisis communications plan).

¹³ *CERC Guide*, page 33.

¹⁴ *CERC Guide*, page 34.

¹⁵ *CERC Guide*, page 8 (on the importance of not having public power struggles) and page 20 (see comment in sidebar).

¹⁶ *CERC Guide*, page 36.

¹⁷ *CERC Guide*, page 23.

¹⁸ *CERC Guide*, page 13.

¹⁹ *CERC Guide*, page 13.

²⁰ *CERC Guide*, at 40.

²¹ *CERC Guide*, at 40. See also Lawrence Susskind and Patrick Field, *Dealing with an Angry Public*, New York: The Free Press (1996) at 16-17.

²² *CERC Guide*, at 39.

²³ *CERC Guide*, page 34.