

# A cowboy's guide to crisis management: Common-sense advice

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My great-grandfather Dan S. Welsh was, according to family legend, one of the first postmasters in Oklahoma's American Indian territory, and one of the finest storytellers in those parts.

This may not seem important to some folks, but let me tell you, it was a big deal when I was a kid trying to outrun bullies who were bigger and meaner than I was. I learned that being a good storyteller could do amazing things to get those bullies distracted. It's hard to laugh and pound on someone at the same time.

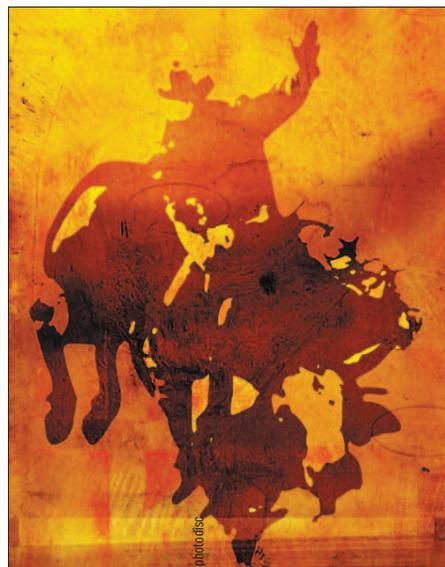
The advice in this article reflects the stories and sayings I heard from Grandpa Dan and his cronies as I was growing up. His cowboy logic made a long-lasting impression on me.

**“Good judgment comes from experience and a lot of that comes from bad judgment.”**

Ask almost anybody if they have life and health insurance, and their response is, “Of course.” However, ask if they look forward to using it, and the answer is the opposite. They have it, but they surely don't want to need it.

When you ask those same people if their organizations have crisis plans, they will find 15 excuses why they don't and why they're not that important. But as many people along the Gulf Coast in the pet and human food distribution business or at banks and mortgage companies have learned, bad luck spares no individual or circumstance. It's not whether you are going to be visited with your share — it's when.

If the situation interrupts the normal



operation of your organization and threatens its success, or even more important, its existence, then it is a crisis. Most crises share these elements:

- They are usually a surprise.
- They take control away from you.
- They attract public scrutiny.
- They are time-sensitive and time-intensive.
- They threaten reputation, stability, financial health, competitive position, project viability and even the continued existence of the organization.

They may come as a natural disaster, financial difficulties, regulations, technology failures, discrimination, harassment, violations of law or company policy, management changes or special interest group opposition. The severity will depend on timing, circumstance, the environment and, most important, how prepared you are.

**“Runnin' from problems is a**

**sure way of runnin' into problems.”**

There are two types of crises. The first kind is sudden, exploding on the scene and needing immediate attention. The second type smolders and builds over time.

Crises almost always signal their approach, though the signs may be subtle. The circumstances may be created if you simply let your business grow without a plan for the worst-case scenario. It may be more overt if you grow quickly without considering safety factors and environmental impact. In some cases, cause may be benign neglect of proper crisis planning and organizational support systems.

You can't manage a crisis, but you can manage your response. The following ideas can make your response more effective:

• **Don't wait.** Just because you don't see trouble doesn't mean it's not there. A good crisis plan with constant revisions and updates is the way to stay ready. Make sure that you have a plan for every crisis and every issue before you need it.

• **Don't ignore your employees** in the planning process or when a crisis occurs. They know more than you think they do, and they can help more than you're likely to expect.

• **Don't ignore the media.** Instead, befriend them. Don't put on airs. Be conversational, but remember what isn't a conversation — at least on their part.

• **Admit your mistakes early, frankly and briefly.** Get the news out fast, before rumors spread.

• **Business is about relationships,** and relationships are about people and feelings. People mostly think with their hearts, not their heads.

• **Cooperate.** Don't wait until

you're begrudgingly forced to communicate.

• **Just tell the truth.** The cowboy who exaggerates often finds that everyone else has left the campfire. A good story is a good story, but a prevarication is still a lie.

• **Use outside help.** Don't push away valuable expertise because of pride.

• **Keep your PR people close.** Bring them in early and often.

Speak plainly, include your key messages, but don't feel the need to fill a silence. Say what you have to say, and then shut up and wait for the next question, especially when you're on the verge of speculation.

**“The best way to drive cattle fast is slowly and carefully.”**

Sometimes it's prudent to spend less time figuring out who is right (especially between the sometimes warring factions within the organization) and more time figuring out what is right. Everyone has his or her own territory, reputation and ego to protect, but none of this really matters during a crisis.

Your stakeholders are your most important communication targets. Start communicating to your employees and their families, and then go to your suppliers, customers and neighbors. After that, you can start worrying about the media, regulators, government leaders and others. **T**

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