EXPERT TIPS FOR CHOOSING A CRISIS CONSULTANT

BY JOSEPH J. DESPLAINES

It is unfortunate that it often takes a crisis for organizations to get concerned about the effectiveness of their crisis response plans and practices. But that is what typically happens, and there has been a flurry of crisis response planning activity in organizations as a result of the numerous active shooter incidents that have occurred this year.

Equally unfortunate is the fact that crises also result in the emergence of a large number of unqualified “experts” offering consultation on various crisis management issues. If you handle crisis management in your organization, your voice mailbox and email inbox are probably full of consultation offers. It can be a real challenge to sort through all the marketing information and determine which consultants are legitimate, offer high-quality consultation and provide a good return on investment.

To assist with selecting the most qualified crisis consultant, four recognized risk management/crisis response experts were asked to identify the characteristics that organizations should look for in choosing consultants who best fit their needs.
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BOB VANDEPOL

Bob VandePol serves as President of Crisis Care Network, the largest provider of workplace critical incident response services in the United States. Crisis Care Network responds to hundreds of workplace crises each month, offering psychological first aid to those affected by a critical event and facilitating employee and organizational return to productivity.

Bob describes the following characteristics as critically important for a crisis mental health consultant:

1. Possesses a Master’s degree (at the least) in the Behavioral Sciences, which connotes a scientific understanding of the effects a crisis can have on the workforce and business operations.

2. Has crisis response experience that can be documented through references.

3. Offers both a strategic and tactical perspective—i.e., the consultant will have a vision of where the organization needs to go and know the action steps necessary to achieve the vision.

4. Always has a plan but is prepared to change course as needs dictate. Good consultants are flexible.

5. Demonstrates compassion and the ability to connect with people to build trust.

PETER GOELZ

Peter Goelz is the Senior Vice President and Manager of the Washington, DC, office of O’Neal and Associates, a well-respected and recognized communications, government affairs and litigation support firm, where he specializes in crisis communications. Peter also served as the Managing Director of the National Transportation Safety Board and was a principal author of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996.

Peter identifies the following as essential qualifications when engaging an external crisis communications consultant:

1. Has experience as both a consultant and a consumer of crisis communications services, thus understanding both sides.

2. Is available 24/7/365.

3. Has the ability and commitment to drop everything and arrive “on scene” as soon as possible.

Peter also cautions organizations to watch out for the most serious crisis communications agency sin, the “bait and switch,” wherein experienced professionals make the sales pitch and the inexperienced consultant shows up during the crisis.
RUSS SIMONS

Russ Simons is the Managing Partner for Venue Solutions Group (VSG). For over 30 years he has been involved in nearly every facet of the sports and entertainment facility industry. At VSG, Russ directs a team of former senior facility managers who evaluate building systems and components, facility conditions, risk management, guest experience, safety, security and sustainable operations.

Russ’ thoughts about the selection process and characteristics of a risk management consultant include:

1. Always conduct due diligence by:
   - Identifying the specifics of what the organization wants (the requirements).
   - Talking with colleagues in your industry about their experiences and getting information on consultants they talk with or know, thereby extending your network.
   - Using trade association resources.
   - Identifying consultants inside and outside your industry, and looking at industries that are prepared to deal with high risk, such as aviation or nuclear power.

2. Interview consultants, asking for documented case studies regarding:
   - Their methodology for working with clients in a similar business.
   - Examples of specific training models.
   - Examples of testing practices.

3. Post-crisis follow up on lessons learned and value added:
   - Ask prospective consultants to describe how they use their crisis experience to help with recovery and how they will decide what is best for your organization.
   - Ask them about their failures and what they learned. How have these “lessons learned” affected their practice? Ask for an explanation of their process for correcting errors.

KEN JENKINS

Ken Jenkins is Vice President of Emergency Services for BMS Global (a division of BMS CAT) and leads the company’s response and communication during disaster activations. For over three decades, BMS CAT and BMS Global have remained focused on the customer response, from reconstruction and restoration of damaged properties to recovering and restoring personal effects. Prior to joining BMS Global, Ken spent 26 years as Manager of Emergency Response for American Airlines.

Ken believes that a good disaster management consultant will practice collaboration before, during and after a crisis event as follows:
1. Pre-Crisis:
   - Communicates on a regular basis after a contract has been signed.
   - Is committed to learning about your business, priorities and culture.
   - Participates in response planning, training and testing.
   - Demonstrates an understanding of insurance limitations and reporting requirements.

2. Crisis Response:
   - Develops a scope of work in partnership with the customer, making suggestions but allowing the customer to drive the process.
   - Holds regular meetings with interested parties during the process.
   - Updates the customer on any changes or challenges encountered through written documentation to assist with post-incident reporting.

3. Crisis Recovery:
   - Provides accurate and detailed reporting, allowing for timely insurance reimbursement.
   - Is willing and committed to meet to review the loss and lessons learned.

Careful reference checks will help organizations verify that prospective consultants use this highly thorough approach.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

If we analyze the advice and summarize the comments of these four highly-regarded experts, the essential characteristics of a high-quality external crisis consultant include:

1. An understanding of your industry and the associated business and regulatory requirements.
2. Experience in anticipating, responding to, managing and recovering from crisis events.
3. Experience with crisis response training and testing crisis response plans.
4. A willingness to be flexible in shaping his/her services to fit your culture and business model rather than forcing you into a predetermined model.
5. The ability to verify all of the above with references from other clients.

Finally, although it wasn’t stated explicitly, all of these experts also conveyed the importance of good chemistry between consultant and client. Since the consultant may potentially guide your organization through a traumatic event, there must be a high level of comfort to ensure trust.
The last thing a crisis manager wants to discover during a crisis is that the consultant is not prepared or has an approach that clashes with that of the organization. Conducting due diligence, asking the right questions and applying the criteria offered by the experts will help in choosing the right crisis consultant for your organization—and this is key in ensuring value for your investment.

About the Author

Joseph J. DesPlaines is Vice President, Risk Management Services at Black Swan Solutions®, a strategic business unit of Empathia, Inc. Mr. DesPlaines has over 25 years experience in Enterprise Risk Management and Crisis Response planning and is one of a small number of Risk Management professionals to have direct, hands-on experience with mass casualty emergency response.

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