

Crisis Management

Just hope you never have to use the information these folks have to impart.

By George C. Larson

As any business school graduate can tell you, the case histories echo across the years: Johnson & Johnson and the Tylenol panic; the Exxon Valdez oil spill; TWA Flight 800. For anyone who has ever experienced what a disastrous event can do to a company or a business, the after-effects are life altering. In corporate aviation, events such as the loss of an aircraft are exceedingly rare; so rare, in fact, that many organizations ignore the possibility altogether.

But to those who train others to develop and implement emergency response plans in order to manage in a crisis, failure to plan for such a loss could be catastrophic for the firm's very survival.

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Steve Bassett, a former broadcaster, is an active pilot and aviation accident investigator who launched The Communications Workshop, LLC (www.thccommunicationsworkshop.com; [301] 483-0158) in 1991 and trains individuals and company teams to manage a crisis. While there

are plenty of public relations firms out there that advertise specialization in crisis management, few know the special demands of an event like the loss of an aircraft and the souls aboard it.

Bassett's "Coping With Crisis 101: Managing an Aviation Disaster" is a one-or-two-day course comprising four segments made up of 14 components. Clients can send a single representative from their company to a seminar setting, from which that person can return to train others. "But, I encourage companies to bring us in to train a team together. Erickson Air Crane put 45 people through the course," he says.

A third service is on-site consultation and assistance during an event. The only caveat to the last option is that Bassett can't become a party to the actual accident investigation. "Only people with a direct connection — engine, avionics, airframe, an em-

ployee of the company — who can bring technical expertise to the party can be included; no outside consultants," he explains.

For Bassett, the best way to manage a crisis is not to have one in the first place, so the first principle is prevention. Safety audits, visits from



fire officials for fire safety, police for security issues and your insurance company for an overall critique will generally provide most organizations with a to-do list that will keep everyone hopping for months.

The three phases that follow prevention — preparation, response and recovery — are what his clients come to him to learn. By the time they leave, they will have developed a written response plan that spells out what actions must be taken in what order by what individuals. Students receive a 160-page workbook along with sample plans representing a composite of what other companies have drawn up. They also receive a template to use

in developing their own plan. "It's all on a disk, and you can just fill in the blanks," he says.

One of Bassett's clients had barely completed a bare-bones plan using the template when an actual disaster struck: His company had an aircraft accident with a fatality. Grabbing his draft plan on which the ink was figuratively still wet, he put the steps into action. The results weren't perfect but the skeleton plan got them through the process and out the other side. Failure is often measured by an organization's demise, says Bassett, so he thinks of the plan as a tool for survival.

Bassett emphasizes the importance of acting quickly and effectively: "I compare it to what athletes always say about the difference between playing college and pro football; in the professional game, everything speeds up," he says. "The actions you take in the first two hours will determine your success or failure."

As a NTSB-trained accident investigator himself, Bassett can take students through the NTSB investigation procedures, rules and practices. The Board could send a 12-man Go Team or it could send a regional investigator who works solo. Part of the response plan will require the formation of your own organization's Go Team to go to the accident site and deal with not just the NTSB but law enforcement, media and even families of victims.

Dealing with the people side of a disaster is the most difficult single aspect of the management problem, Bassett says. He advises working on a regular basis with victims' families, providing facts to them, maintaining continuous contact, bringing in people trained in counseling including clergy, the local police and the Red Cross. The roster of personnel assignments includes your employees designated to be with families 24/7; work with the NTSB for on site visits; and arrange hotel rooms, desks, computers, conference rooms, memorial services and security for personal effects. "It's a whole list of things most people never think of," Bassett says. Some companies have a designated media contact, but most don't. In a crisis, the experts say only one individual should be delegated as a spokesperson, whether it be an employee or a PR firm that knows your company well and has a prepared response ready before it's needed. Media kits that provide a company overview and identify executives and

What Clients Say

On Coping With Crisis 101:

"Any director of flight operations should consider this class on the same level they consider simulator training. To me, it's kind of like your homeowner or fire insurance; you never use it but it's nice to know that it's there. . . . We used [Steve Bassett's] template to update a rather thorough disaster plan we already had. And we used his publication and CD extensively in reviewing the existing plan.

Jeff Tolbert, President and CEO, AirMed International

"Over the years of trying to get the company to put together an aviation crisis plan and move it into the corporate crisis plan. I met a lot of resistance. I was able to correspond with Bassett and bring in key people. Steve came to our company and worked with us one on one. He provided the workbook, CD and templates for our crisis management plan, and we also had the opportunity to be in front of the camera and do some mock presentations. It's been of tremendous value to us. We hope next month to have our first internal simulated disaster, and after that we'll have him back along with the NTSB and the FBI. It has turned out to be quite an education."

Tom Greene, Director of Aviation, Delhaize America

officials are a must. This is the moment when the CEO must step up to the plate.

Bassett points out that technology has changed the rules of the game. "We teach media — who they are, what they do, why they do it. And there is the "new" media. Bloggers can be affecting you and your company and you might not even know it." He cites the instance of one client that assured him that the company was universally adored by the media. Bassett urged them to run a search for the company name and check out the hits exhaustively. Sure enough, the next morning, an administrator told him she'd typed in the name and up popped a blog bad-mouthing the company.

"If your company doesn't have a designated media rep, select someone and get them trained," says Bassett. "We'll train them. Or get people who can come in and help." It goes without saying that in order to help, they need to put out messages you've agreed to. Even CEOs need training and constant support from media-savvy team members when the heat is on, he says.

Among other practical tips, Bassett advises distributing copies of the response plan in both electronic and hard copy form to secure and diverse locations. "One good place to keep a copy is the trunk of your car," he advises. A person responsible for

coordinating the response also needs to update the plan on a schedule — "At least quarterly but whenever policy or personnel changes," Bassett says. And one of the most important elements of the plan is telephone and contact information for each and every player, within the organization and without, along with constant checks for changes done at least as often as every update.

Finally, he advises that the company take care of its own as well as it cares for others. "This is hard on people," he warns. Because the clock seems to speed up, employees may not even realize what they're experiencing until after it's all over. That's when it's time to ensure they get counseling, too.

Bassett has trained more than 150 people and has a list of dozens of client companies and organizations, one of which is the Helicopter Association International. After an organization is trained Bassett says he also will facilitate the actual development of the response plan and help tailor the plan to a company's specific requirements. "We also will guide them through plan testing — exercises — to ensure that everyone fully understands their role in the process," he says. **B&CA.**

This reprint is designed as a marketing tool for The Communications Workshop, LLC and is a condensed version of the original article that appears in the November 2007 edition of Business & Commercial Aviation that also reports on another company that offers a similar service.