

Case Study: The Accidental Spokesperson

The Company

LightChem North is a branch plant of a large chemical company, located in upstate New York. This company's 350-employee workforce is engaged in recycling and recovering used metal parts from various industries. They chemically degrease, electrolytically remove plating substances as well as recover them, and selectively rehabilitate certain metal parts for reuse in mechanical devices.

The Crisis

During what was meant to be a routine change in solvents – in which used and contaminated solvent is replaced with clean, fresh solvent – a glitch in the transfer crane operation caused approximately 250-300 gallons of this hot, organic liquid to spill out of the container from about twelve feet in the air. Upon hitting the floor, the chemical splashed onto two to three dozen workers, all of whom were immediately burned and partially asphyxiated. The substance was Compound 2, 4, 9, Trichloroethylene, a degreasing solvent with heavy vapors that rest close to the ground. This chlorinated hydrocarbon is listed by the EPA as a known carcinogen and health hazard that, when inhaled, causes nervous system depression, and, externally, can irritate and burn skin and eyes.

The Complexities

Personnel at the LightChem plant had practiced for similar emergencies a number of times, and those workers in the nearby area who were able to function began to respond, but the fumes were extraordinarily powerful. As it happens, all of the showers intended for decontamination purposes were located in an area opposite where the spill had occurred and were essentially blocked from use, at least temporarily. The nearest fire rescue station was approximately seven miles down the road in town, and four of the plant's seven-day shift EMTs were victims.

The Choices

1. Call headquarters. Report the incident and await instructions.
2. Take immediate action to deal with the situation as it was developing in the plant itself and contacting 9-1-1.
3. Evacuate the plant and as many personnel as possible to prevent them from being overcome by fumes and let the three functioning EMTs handle most of the response.

The Culmination

As the sound of sirens could be heard nearing the plant, Charles Westerfield, the plant manager, a 12-year veteran of this facility, reflexively closed the gates around the plant. He quickly posted his two security guards near the front gate to allow the fire trucks in when they arrived and keep anybody else out. About a mile ahead of

the fire trucks were two local television station vans and, in the distance, Charles could see and hear what must have been a news helicopter flying in from one of the major news centers in the state.

As the news cars stopped near the gate, cameramen and reporters jumped out of the vehicles and came running to the now-closed front gate. Charles walked out to greet them and as the reporters ran up with their cameras rolling and microphones out, they were asking for a quick explanation of what was going on inside the plant. Charles was well known to the media people as being one of the more important employers in the region and, being very friendly and approachable, he knew the reporters by name. The most insistent reporter from Channel 4 was also the most excited in asking her questions.

Charles looked through the chain link fence at the cameras and said, quite simply, "Mary, calm down, calm down, calm down. We've been spilling this stuff and burning people with it for years. This is no big deal." He then said some other things that were important to know and valuable to hear. However, his single "sound bite" ricocheted onto every news outlet in the local region and beyond. The result was embarrassment for LightChem North as well as unwelcome attention for Charles Westerfield, whose words reached the ears of executives at the chemical company headquarters. Up until this incident, Charles and his work as plant manager had been highly regarded by his superiors at the company.

As required by law, LightChem North regularly conducted quarterly drills in the plant to prepare workers to react appropriately and promptly to spills of these toxic organic chemicals used in the remanufacturing process. This training permitted the workers to handle this emergency and its complications just as they had in the quarterly drills. However, in the company's very detailed emergency plans, no one apparently anticipated that a good natured, friendly plant manager, one willing to speak to the press, would cause the level of trouble that he did.

The Conclusions

Every day we see *Lukaszewski's First Rule of Crisis Survival* reasserted and revalidated. This axiom is: Neither the media, your critics, the government, your toughest competitor, or your angriest neighbor can take you down. Crises and bad news are almost always caused by internal denial, over-confident management and executives, lack of readiness, well-meaning friends, or relatives.

As obvious as this scenario is in its readiness lessons, it bears repeating that an appropriate spokesperson and a back-up spokesperson need to be selected and ready for events of this nature. Had the plant manager been a victim, for example, having someone else ready to step out and communicate effectively and promptly would have been very much in the plant's interest. The time to pick spokespersons is during your readiness preparations and exercise – and part of their preparation needs to include what to say and not say to the media.

5.6.3 What to Do and Avoid in Emergency Communication (Including Interviews)

DO

- ▶ Maintain your composure.
- ▶ Provide information to authorities and the media as quickly as facts can be verified.
- ▶ Be prompt with information about rescue and recovery operations.
- ▶ Tell the truth.
- ▶ When you don't know an answer, admit it. Then promise to get the information as quickly as possible and get it.
- ▶ Take the initiative in getting your information out.
- ▶ Accompany media when they are on site.
- ▶ Recognize media deadlines.
- ▶ Use non-technical language.
- ▶ Give all reporters covering an event equal access to facts and subject matter experts.
- ▶ Set ground rules for reporters and enforce them.
- ▶ Check back frequently with reporters to help them keep the facts straight.
- ▶ Correct inaccuracies quickly.
- ▶ Express sympathy.
- ▶ Emphasize the positive while being candid about the negative.

AVOID

- ▶ Speculating about anything.
- ▶ Guessing at the cause.
- ▶ Placing blame for the emergency.
- ▶ Guessing at people's injuries.
- ▶ Attempting to estimate the dollar damage. (You are not the expert – work with local authorities on this.)
- ▶ Arguing with a reporter.
- ▶ Saying: "No comment," "I'm not allowed to talk," "I can't tell you anything," "I don't have time to talk to you."
- ▶ Playing favorites with reporters or between electronic vs. print media.
- ▶ Discussing anything "off-the-record."
- ▶ Asking to see the reporter's story.
- ▶ Expecting the community's trust. You must earn it.