When Shaming Fingers Point: Dealing with Negative Publicity

by Dorothy W. Hewes

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Newspapers keep us well informed about the tragedies and traumas of daily life. And in their telling, they can help us find answers to some of the puzzles in our own professional lives. We have almost daily examples—faulty O-rings in the Challenger, withdrawal of a well-known television evangelist after indiscreet behavior, misappropriation of federal funds or misuse of federal influence.

How do administrators react when shaming fingers point in their direction? How do they respond when the focus is on some real or falsely rumored criminal, unethical, or otherwise shameful happening in the workplace for which they are responsible? We can use our newspapers to learn some valuable lessons.

Haven't you read negative publicity—or seen it on television—and wondered how you would deal with something like that? Whether the accusation is true or false makes no difference in the way it should be handled. Strategies and mistakes of government and corporate administrators can be used as case histories from which we can learn valuable lessons about dealing with crises.

The powerful effects of adverse public relations have only recently become obvious to big business. As one result, a new field called issues management has emerged during the past decade. A public relations specialist, W. Howard Chase, introduced issues management in the **Public Relations Journal** in 1976 and 1977. In practice, issues management includes attorneys, economists, and social scientists. Their work connects advertising and issues, with emphasis upon the identification, monitoring, and manipulation of those trends that may develop into policies and regulations affecting the way a business or industry can function.

Directly and indirectly, issues management affects what we read and view concerning environmental problems, the importance of free enterprise, and other aspects of the creative tension between big business and the taxpaying public. It is a communications strategy with both positive and negative potential that relates to negative publicity—prevailing public opinion will affect the way news media deal with a situation. Our professional field is no exception. We must recognize that other-than-mother care still

arouses complicated emotional reactions and that these can reverberate into our professional lives. In this sense, organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Children's Defense Fund have contributions to make in the realm of issues management.

For directors of early childhood programs, informational strategies developed in issues management are helpful when it comes to handling emergency situations and adverse media reports. Two recent books, **Issues Management** by Heath and Nelson and **On Deadline—Managing Media Relations** by Howard and Mathews, include guidelines that can be applied to even small child care centers. Their detailed case studies show how negative publicity has been handled, and mishandled, so that we can interpret what we find in our daily news media. For instance, the change from an initial siege mentality to an issues management approach by the Nestle Corporation led to a resolution of the boycott over its infant formula marketing. A similar change might be needed by a center struggling to alter unfavorable community attitudes.

Although we might not aspire to the late Andy Warhol's statement that everybody is famous for 15 minutes, what might happen to make us notorious for a while in our own communities? Only rarely does the limelight shine on the positive aspects of our field that we would like to emphasize. The greatest fear for many of us is to be involved with an alleged sexual abuse case. Other things happen. A baby is kidnapped or a child is taken by the non-custodial parent. Playground accidents and drownings are newsworthy. Teachers celebrating Halloween might be accused of teaching Satanism. Armed intruders can force their entrance, or planes can fall from the sky. The treasurer is found to have been diverting the federal nutrition money to her cousin's restaurant. These are not fiction; they are news items from my own files. Let's brainstorm a bit more. What is your worst case scenario, the worst thing you can visualize in the way of negative publicity?

Now, ask yourself another set of questions. What have you done to prepare for negative publicity? What would you do if something dreadful happened? Or, for that matter, how would you deal with something merely unfortunate? My own analysis of crisis situations—including those that I've survived during my 30-odd years with children's programs—has been fortified by what I've learned through reading issues management strategies. This cannot be a complete listing for your center. Only you can know what is best. However, here are my suggestions:

1. Assume that, at some unexpected time, you or a member of your staff or some aspect of your program will be the focus of negative attention by the news media and the public. You have taken all the precautions possible—and you not only have good insurance coverage but a previously established relationship with an attorney. You also are a member of an appropriate professional group, perhaps NAEYC plus one for your particular type of program. Furthermore, awareness of ways to develop good public relations on a long-term basis is part of your normal operating procedure. This includes your equivalent of a press kit, usually a brochure describing the center, plus whatever seems appropriate. If nothing else, this will mean that names are spelled correctly. For me, it once established that my program was not the one being investigated; it was the school across town with a similar name.

2. Encourage some worst case thinking among staff members and others involved in governance of the program. There is a superstitious fear about talking or thinking about disasters. (How many parents in your center have legal wills? What have you done to prepare for a major earthquake or typhoon or other natural disaster?) According to some depth psychologists, fears of unspoken or unthought fantasies can be more dreadful than anything that can really happen. As director, you can initiate this sort of thinking and bring it into the open. At that point, it is appropriate to move on to a discussion about how you will deal with such things. The possible alternatives can be discussed. Consider how you would deal with parents and children, as well as how you would manage the outside world. Consider coping mechanisms already demonstrated with problems.

3. Determine who will meet the media people if there is a worst case situation. Perhaps it is logical that you, as director, be the one to deal with reporters, telephone calls, television newscasters; but there may be someone who would be more effective than you. They say that men project authority and women are more trusted by the public. Take your choice, but make that decision **before** something happens. Then make sure that the designated spokesperson's telephone number is available at any hour of the day or night. Howard and Mathews point out that planning helps organizations deal with potential first class media relations disasters with speed, professionalism, and at least the outward appearance of calm.

4. The spokesperson should gather all of the facts quickly and tell the

story as fully and as soon as possible. Bad news does not evaporate if ignored. Two cases can be cited. Gary Hart refused to talk with reporters, then told part of his story. His attorney told part. Members of his presidential campaign staff, involved women and their lawyers, investigative reporters, and others—all regaled the public with conflicting bits and pieces of news and gossip. An essentially personal situation entered the public domain. In contrast, Senator Lloyd Bentsen probably gained popularity when he dropped his monthly breakfasts for lobbyists—guests at $10,000 per plate—and announced that "When I make a mistake, I make a doozy."

Making the initial contact with the media to tell them about the situation often makes for more sympathetic treatment. It allows for greater control, and usually makes the public exposure shorter. In some cases, taking the story to the press allows remedial action to be made part of the story.

A campus child care director who handled a situation in a direct and positive manner provides an example. Late one Friday afternoon, she received a telephone inquiry from a local television station asking about the role of an accused child molester during the time he had been a student volunteer in her center. Although this had been before her own employment, she was able to quickly find his record and tell the reporter that his sole responsibility was cleaning the rabbit hutch and painting some shelves—six years earlier. Note that she only released information that is legally permitted; she did not discuss the quality of his performance or personal attributes. Since this was a major news story at the time, she realized that more questions would follow. She contacted her superior, the dean of student affairs, and she notified the campus newspaper. In addition, she wrote and duplicated a letter that would be in the mailboxes of the parents on Monday morning. Staff members received weekend telephone calls via an established telephone tree so that they could provide a unified response. As a result, what could have become a full-blown story by itself was just a sentence or two that was buried in more dramatic events. Only the campus paper dealt with it in more detail, and their angle was the security for enrolled children provided through the center's policies.

5. If it is not possible to deal with adversive situations in a quick and tidy manner, prepare at the outset for communications that are frank and honest. As long as public interest in your situation is sustained, all communications should continue to be directed through the designated spokesperson. Everyone else in your organization should firmly say that they are unable to comment; they should refer inquiries to your designated spokesperson. Staff and parents should not be encouraged at this point to speak casually about the situation or to make assumptions based upon partial knowledge. As director, it is essential that you model appropriate behavior.

6. The spokesperson should have a basic understanding of what goes on in a news interview. Particularly in television and radio newscasting, only a few seconds will be provided for your side of the story. This means that the most important points should be made at the beginning of each response. A slower delivery will help communicate your message; rapid speech makes it hard for a reporter taking notes and is particularly hard for a television audience to follow. One sentence may be all that is broadcast, so the person being interviewed should avoid being led into making any statement that reflects negatively upon the program. Sentences should be phrased positively, using words that are commonly understood by the reading or listening public. Sincerity and professionalism will help project a positive response and will deflect some criticism.

Even in a time of crisis, try to remember that public opinion of child care will be affected by what the spokesperson says and how he or she says it. Many directors have had encounters with the media in which the purposes and activities of their centers were distorted in the writing or filming. The press kit mentioned earlier can be of help here. Assume that the person doing the interview knows absolutely nothing about child development or early childhood education. Probably the readers / listeners / viewers don't know much either. Somehow, the essence of your position must be expressed in the short time or space allotted.

7. Recognize that the personal element of shame or guilt may dominate your thoughts and actions after an event that results in negative publicity. It may involve some ethical dilemma. There may be a condition known as cognitive dissonance in which two or more sets of information just refuse to fit together, perhaps incoming material that just isn't consistent with what you already know or believe. You will feel tension, anxiety, conflict. A network of professional colleagues may provide support at this point, perhaps even more than personal friends and family who cannot validate your work on the significant peer level that is needed. Taking steps toward repairing damage done by the crisis may be helpful to your recovery and will provide the staff and other involved persons with the

leadership model they must have to carry forward after appropriate grief, remorse, or anger has been taken care of.

I deliberately used the phrase "shaming fingers" in the title of this article because I want to emphasize this personal element. In our society, the element of shame is one of those things that keeps us working on straight and narrow paths. From childhood, perfectly normal people have determined to do certain things and not to do others because of public disapproval. In some cases, the public may be pointing your way. Most of us have little sympathy with the owners of a child care center that is discovered to be the front for a porno photography ring! However, even when a preventable tragedy has happened, there must be a realistic evaluation of what happened, and the feelings of guilt must be recognized and dealt with. This may involve professional counseling for everybody involved, often available through a public agency or volunteer psychotherapists.

Preparation for an event that would generate negative public relations can be a factor in relieving the shame and guilt that result. Keep this idea in mind when you watch newscasts or read newspapers. Rehearsal through visualization of how other leaders and administrators deal with adverse situations can be helpful preparation. In addition to the obvious strategies that are used, try to figure out what characteristics are displayed by those who are coping. What do you think was going on behind the scenes? How might issues management have been applied to these events that have been brought to you by the media? How might they apply to your role as a program director? Heath and Nelson point out that a major trend in managerial philosophy since the mid 1960's has been the incorporation of data and advice from many people into the process of strategic planning. Most of us have been doing this all along. The new field of issues management, with its techniques for dealing with crisis situations, can offer clues to help us learn some professional skills from the daily news.

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