

Marquette PR students taught crisis management skills: Employers need to have employees ready for emergencies

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By [Molly Dill](#)

When she taught a public relations writing course at Marquette University during the fall semester, Nicole Singer, senior PR counselor at Bottom Line Marketing & Public Relations in Milwaukee, included crisis management in her curriculum because those skills are becoming a more in-demand service for employers.

Disasters – whether natural or man-made – can strike at any time, and could have a crippling impact on a business. With an emergency preparedness plan in place, a company can appropriately respond to unexpected events.

"We have been hearing more and more in the news about both natural disasters...and human incident crises," Singer said. "Communication experts as an industry need to know how to respond to that. It's something companies are realizing isn't necessarily a skill set they already have on hand."



Singer

Vivian Marinelli, senior director of crisis management services at FEI Behavioral Health in Milwaukee, visited Singer's class to discuss tips on developing emergency plans.

FEI, a national employee assistance program, has provided emergency management services for major events like the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the Boston Marathon bombing.

Employers should discuss emergency management with a focus on planning for situational awareness and personal responsibility, Marinelli said.



Marinelli

"Whether it's a student or a new hire at an organization...hopefully in the orientation, you've got some understanding or there has been some discussion about emergency practices," she said.

Companies should conduct risk assessments to determine problematic locations or situations that could arise, Marinelli said. For example, in Marquette's urban setting, walking around listening to music without paying attention to one's surroundings could be unsafe, she told the students.

"When should I be a little bit more observant than at other times when I can kind of let my guard down a little bit?" Marinelli asked.

Employers should evaluate their current emergency preparedness plans and assure a number of different scenarios are addressed, since different response strategies apply to natural disasters, active shooters and other emergencies.

Practice is also a critical step in implementing an effective crisis management plan, she said.

A workplace should communicate information clearly during and following a crisis to inform employees, clients and the public.

A communications expert can help develop the response plan, communicate the need for personal responsibility and awareness skills among fellow employees, and share details internally and externally if a crisis occurs, Singer said.

"There's a lot of different audiences to hit," she said. "You don't want to be moving so fast that you're not confirming information, which doesn't help anyone. When an incident or crisis happens, people are most impatient to learn what happened, what you're doing about it, and how will you keep it from happening again?"

Employers should acknowledge the confusion and fear employees may be feeling upfront and then do their best to get the facts to them.

"There's a lot of different layers to think of, and then it's also getting the messaging down," Singer said. "You want to first and foremost convey the appropriate emotional response for a situation."

Marinelli tells employers to ask themselves: "How would you feel if someone was speaking to you? How would you want this information brought to you?"

The communication can be done in several ways, and social media is becoming increasingly useful, Marinelli said.

"In our response with the Boston Marathon bombing, there was a large reliance on social media, both by the Boston Police Department and by the group that was running the marathon," she said. "And it became a very useful tool, whereas other times it cannot be very useful."

A clear, standard social media hashtag could help people involved in the crisis situation communicate with family and each other. And a central crisis line phone number can be useful for the same reason in large crises.

Employers should be proactive in approaching potential emergencies so they're not caught off guard, Marinelli said.

"There are a lot of them who choose for one reason or another to wait until something happens because they don't think it'll happen to them," she said.

Dan Paulmeyer, a student in Singer's class, said crisis communication is an undervalued field.

"A good crisis communication plan can save a company. Without a strong crisis communication plan in place, the day to day work could all be for nothing," he said. "Slowly, crisis communication will go from an accessory to a necessity."

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