



FORCE SCIENCE[®] NEWS

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In This Edition:

Whether it's an OIS with racial overtones, a bad hire who drives drunk on- or off-duty, a cyber hacker who exposes sensitive files—something is lurking out there that could suddenly hurl your agency into a maelstrom.

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Crisis expert shares strategies for building community trust

How well you weather it will depend, says critical communications expert Melissa Agnes, on how skillfully your department has nurtured what she calls a “crisis-ready culture.”

When trouble strikes, skating through it completely damage-free may be unrealistic. But you want the trust level to be high enough that your community will “give you the benefit of the doubt” in even the most challenging situations, she says.

And that requires sustained time and effort devoted proactively to public relationship-building—what you might call making frequent deposits into a ‘trust’ fund that you can draw on when you really need it.

Agnes outlined a practical strategy for such crisis preparation in a provocative, two-part, two-hour interview with Force Science Analyst Brian Willis, president of the popular Winning Mind Training organization. Their candid audio conversations were posted recently on Willis’s members-only website, the Excellence in Training Academy.



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INSTITUTE

Agnes is co-founder of the international crisis management firm Agnes+Day, based in Montreal. She speaks and consults worldwide to audiences and clients that include NATO representatives, national defense ministers, and heads of public and private agencies, including law enforcement administrators, helping them craft readiness programs with what she considers the secrets to effective crisis prevention and response in the 21st century.

In a nutshell, here are steps to successful crisis readiness that she recommends for agency leaders:

ID TOP RISKS. First, Agnes says, you should “think through” your worst possible crisis scenarios, identifying the five or ten highest risks you most worry about afflicting your agency and that you’ve seen throw others into turmoil.

Obviously, these might include a controversial OIS or personal misconduct or criminal acts by personnel that impact your agency’s reputation. But, she urges, don’t overlook issues “not addressed very often by law enforcement.”

For example, “Cyber-security should 100% be in your top 10 because of the world we live in today.” A breach of sensitive personnel or criminal records can suddenly “sweep in on you from an unexpected place” and cause great concern. Other must-consider issues, she believes, are natural disasters and terrorist attacks.

With risks identified, “You now have a few categories you can go deep on,” Agnes says. “What can you do now to build trust around those topics?” As you explore and act on that

question, “that trust will ricochet into other areas as well.”

SEEK FEEDBACK. You next need to gather core data anchored to your risks: 1) what does your community expect of your agency if/when one of these crises erupts, as well as with everyday operations? 2) what about your agency is currently working, what isn’t, and what needs improvement? 3) how can you reach your community’s stakeholders; i.e., what media (social and mainstream) do they follow; what apps do they use that might benefit you for communication; who are the formal and informal leaders, etc.?

Let people know you’re seeking candid feedback and what your goals are, Agnes advises. Spread the word through the media, community forums, formal and informal surveys, and especially through street officers making in-person inquiries.

“Go into this with an open mind,” she urges. “Don’t assume you know the answers. It’s easy to make assumptions and completely miss the mark.”

You want to find areas of strength you can amplify, as well as weaknesses you can work to mitigate. “Just by asking the right questions, you send the message that you care, that you’re trying something [and] want to hear what they say. When people share a grievance and you care, you subconsciously start to build trust.”

Your intelligence-gathering, incidentally, must include internal surveying of your agency’s personnel as well as the external sampling of civilians.

BUILD STEADILY. Now that you have “people speaking up [with] such valuable feedback, what are you going to do about it?” she asks. Too often leaders think in terms of a one-time “big initiative and hope it’s going to have grand results,” Agnes says. But “trust is built over time [with] the steady cumulative effect of a lot of smaller things.”

Your leaders and individual officers alike need to find ways “every single day” to reach your community with “updates on progress you are making to implement change or new actions you’re taking or new questions you’re asking [that] show that you can be trusted.”

In the interviews, Agnes references creative efforts one agency, Mountain View (CA) PD, has taken to forge bonds with its community. Understanding the popularity of Twitter, for one example, the department frequently “Tweets out where officers are going to be stationed for traffic control to catch speeders,” she says.

Initially, people were puzzled; why blatantly reveal that information? But the department explained that rather than filling a ticket quota, their objective is “keeping the community safe and keeping accidents from occurring” by prompting drivers to slow down—a message that projects a positive guardian image.

“In a perfect world,” Agnes says, “you build [a relationship] up so that if crisis strikes, people hearing of it will think, ‘Naw, that can’t be. There’s got to be more to it.’ Then you come out with your communication because you are crisis-ready and you show them there is more to it.

“You don’t get that benefit of doubt just by one action. You get it by showcasing small things that add up.”

[As an example of another agency’s daily imaginative efforts in this regard, see Force Science News #283 of 6/2/15, which describes community trust-building by the Kalamazoo (MI) PD. Click here to read it in the FSN archives.]

COMMUNICATE EXTENSIVELY. Broadcast your mission and your messages as widely as possible. “It’s not good enough just to do something positive. Today, you have to communicate what you are doing,” Agnes stresses.

She strongly advocates actively exploiting every “platform” of modern communication—from hash-tag messages to blogs to websites to YouTube to Facebook to press conferences to town hall-type appearances—to initiate and expand two-way dialog with your citizenry. And when you get exposure through one medium, “share and share and share” it via others to leverage your reach, she says.

An important element of your communication should be to “educate people about your dilemmas,” she says. “Civilians need to better understand things like body cameras. On the surface, they think body cameras show what really happened. But there is so much more to it than that—the pros and especially the cons, like the cameras’ limitations—that people don’t understand because no one is really informing them.” In a crisis, this lack of information can contribute to “things spinning out of control.”

You want to build a reputation as “the voice of trust, credibility, and leadership”—the go-to source for the straight story in a crisis. She cites the Boston Marathon bombing as an example.

“Within five minutes of the bombs going off,” the Boston PD “activated the social media channels where people were accustomed to finding them to open up a two-way dialog,” Agnes says. The frenzied media “noise” generated by the bombing was tremendous—“more than half a million tweets on Twitter alone in the first three hours, not to mention other media.” Yet the police department was “able to rise above all the chatter as the credible source” by providing continuous updates and information to keep people safe and to solicit their help in finding the culprits—a “mind-blowing” achievement.

HAVE GUTS. When an inflammatory crisis hits—a racially tinged OIS, for example—“it is very vulnerable for a leader to be out front, communicating something without all the facts,” Agnes acknowledges. “You used to be able not to say anything for 24 to 48 hours or even a week. Today, ‘no comment’ is no longer an option. If you don’t speak, there are people out there who are willing to control the narrative for you and put their take on your story, and they will fight each other to scream the loudest.”

You realistically can’t have all the answers at the outset, but people “do expect some form of response,” Agnes says. “They want to see compassion, they want to know this matters to you, that you are dedicated to taking care of it, what you are doing to take care of it, and when they can hear from you again.

“It takes a lot of guts to live-stream a press conference on Periscope for the world to watch. But what that action says to the community is that ‘you are not hiding behind anything. You are forthright and upfront. You are here to speak with us and are going to listen to us if we speak back to you.’ ”

COLLABORATE. While you’re developing your trust-building strategies, “consult with fellow agencies,” Agnes suggests. “This step is often overlooked, but there are many police agencies that have been experimenting for several years now and are doing amazing things. As a result, they have a lot of experience they’re willing to share.”

Likewise, Willis proposes, be willing to share your experiences at training conferences—even if you’ve had “a crisis that blew up in your face. Share your mistakes and talk about the lessons you learned from times you weren’t prepared. This will prompt other agencies to think about where they are now and decide they’d better start taking action.”

UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS. The bottom line, in Agnes’s opinion, is this: “Trust is not built overnight. It’s a learning experience. Some things are going to work, some aren’t. Don’t be hard on yourself or your team if you don’t get it right away. Keep the right mindset. Take one step in the right direction every day. Learn and move on.”

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To join Brian Willis’s Excellence in Training Academy go to: www.excellenceintrainingacademy.com.

With membership, you can access his conversations with Agnes in full, plus an ever-growing roster of useful audio interviews with other prominent law enforcement authorities, including Force Science instructors Chris Butler and Dr. John

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