

# LeadingAge Mass. Conference and Expo

*When Your Organization is Tested by  
Crisis*

*June 3, 2025*



# About Me

## President & Founder

- 21 years leading Ball Consulting Group
- Has led over 100 organizations through major crises, including many organizations serving older adults
- Previously was VP for Comms. at two health care trade associations
- 14 years in senior roles in Massachusetts state government
- LeadingAge Mass. member for 16 years



# About Ball Consulting Group

- Strategic communications firm founded in 2004
- Specializing in health care, aging services, human services, nonprofits, education, and housing
- Develop proactive PR campaigns - storytelling - using mainly the news media, with the goal of getting clients in the news
- Provide crisis communications services - both planning and execution - to keep clients out of the news



# Examples of Crises

- Fires/floods/gas leaks/natural disasters
- #metoo/harassment/discrimination
- Toxic workplaces
- Product recalls
- Data breaches
- Abuse
- Major crimes
- Strikes/employee actions
- Lawsuits and govt. settlements



# Trend: Internal Issues Become Crises

- The majority of crises that we manage result from internal HR, staffing, and operations issues
- Nobody turns a blind eye to a toxic culture any longer
- A new generation of workers is claiming their right to a stable, fair workplace that is free of discrimination
- A rising labor movement







“To anyone who has experienced sexual harassment or other misconduct at the FDIC, I again want to apologize and express how deeply sorry I am. I also acknowledge my own failures as Chairman, both in failing to recognize how my temperament in meetings impacted others and for not having identified deeper cultural issues at the FDIC sooner.”

-- Martin J. Gruenberg, former FDIC Chairman



# “Unfit” Culture at Planet Fitness

## Ousted Planet Fitness CEO Created Toxic Culture, Per Report

OCTOBER 27, 2023



credit: jhvephoto/shutterstock.com

COURTNEY REHFELDT

Former Planet Fitness employees allege that the company fostered a “toxic, high school environment” under Chris Rondeau

## Fired Planet Fitness CEO kept kegs tapped and thousands in personal cash on hand

Katie Hawkinson, Katherine Long, and Jack Newsham Oct 25, 2023, 5:19 AM EDT

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Arantza Pena Popo/Insider

# What Crises Have in Common

- Potential for crisis known in advance
- Management hoping problem “would go away”
- Ramifications and long-term effects not considered
- Differences in opinion in how to deal with issue
- Disbelief that situation could become crisis or media issue



# Misperceptions About Crisis

- It will have no material impact on bottom line or business/community reputation
- It will go away by not talking about it and not dealing with it head on
- It will “blow over” or be a “one-day story”
- If you just don’t call a reporter back, they will move on to another story

# Common Crisis Mishandling

- Not taken seriously
- Not communicated in the right sequence with the right stakeholder groups
- Difficulty mobilizing key team members
- Rush to judgment about root cause
- Lack of proper communication with public
- No empathy/apology
- CEO indifference

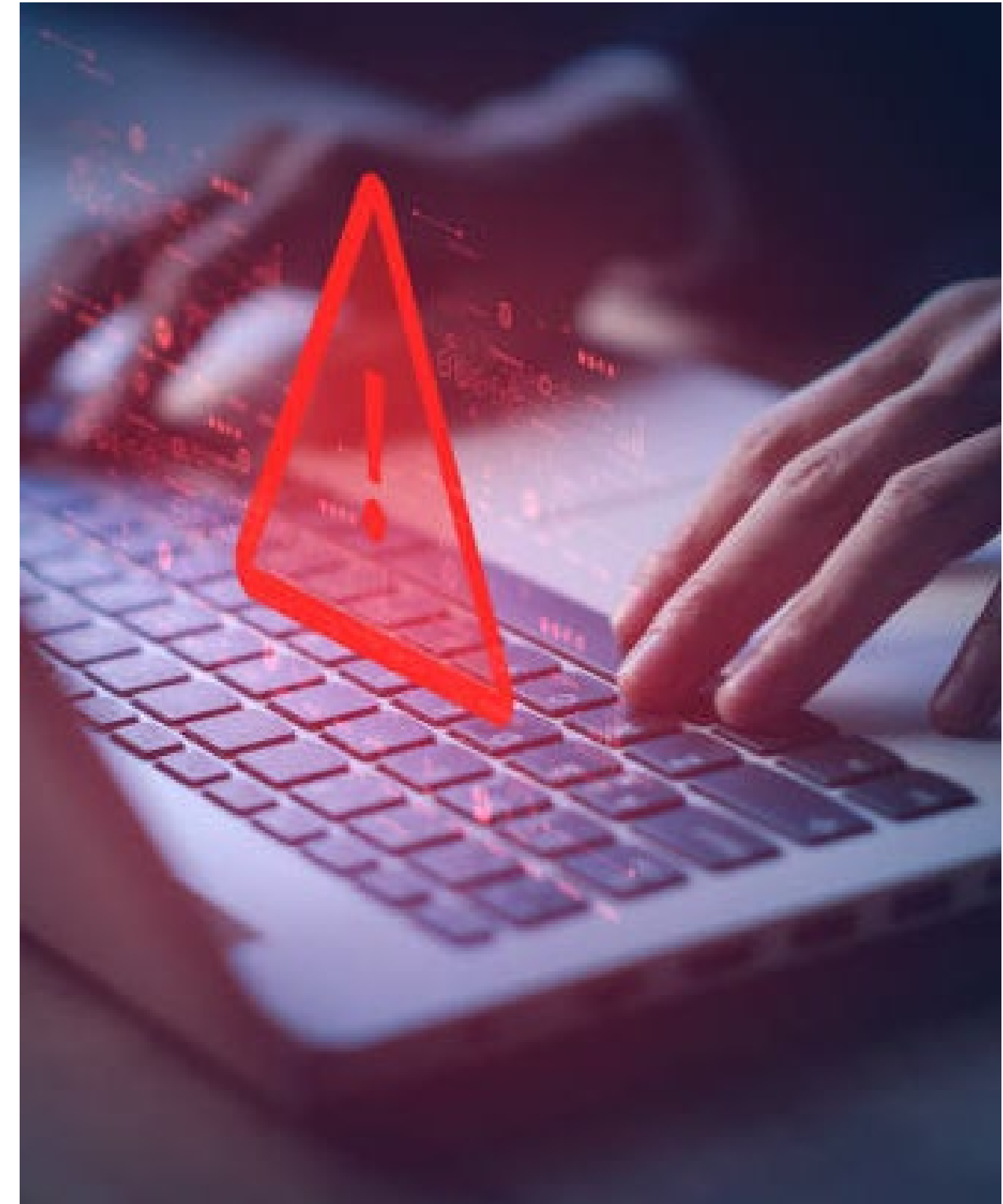


# Disaster (of a) quote



# Cyberattacks are “When” not “If”

- In any organization, cyberattacks are almost impossible to prevent
- Foreign threat actors are incredibly sophisticated and, right now, are winning
- The better prepared for the inevitable you are, the less impact it will have on your organization
- In any circumstance, it will be bad
- Take the right steps out of the gate





# Managing Through a Cyberattack

- Have the right resources in place *before* the attack
  - Counsel with deep experience in responding to data theft
  - IT consultants with specialization in cybercrimes
  - Communications consultant with relevant experience
  - A cyber insurance policy
- Heavily regulated space; compliance is critical
- Communications with stakeholders
  - Keep it limited to exactly what you know
  - Make clear the steps you will take to protect those you serve or support
- Have a crisis communications plan ready to be deployed

# Speaking of Insurance

- Many care providers are underinsured - period
- Any organization caring for vulnerable individuals is at great financial risk
- If you transport people, your risk is even higher
  - Have a policy on cell phone use while driving and enforce it
  - Have GPS and speed tracking on all vehicles
  - Train staff regularly on proper operation
- It is critical to get an objective review of the adequacy of your insurance coverage - and not by the person selling the insurance
  - Risk management consultant





# Being Prepared...Starts with a Crisis Plan

- It is critical for organizations of all sizes to have a crisis communications plan
  - Management team must be familiar with it...everybody must understand their role
- Drill on the plan regularly
- Keep the plan updated
- Redundancy is good; duplication is not

# How to Create a Crisis Plan

- Identify potential crises
- Review past situations
- Situation analysis
  - Examine systems for weaknesses
  - Review facilities for issues
  - Evaluate communications chain
- List key stakeholders
  - Funders, local officials, legislators, influencers





# How to Establish a Crisis Team

- Identify key players
  - CEO or Executive Director
  - VPs, Directors or managers of operations, programs, HR, finance, development, medical, transportation, facilities
  - Legal, IT, PR/comms consultant
  - Get outside perspective: board, counsel, accountant
- Identify team leader
  - Manages roles & responsibilities



# Lights, Camera...





# How to Prepare for Media Inquiries


- Prepare potential media materials:
  - Holding statement for first 24 hours of crisis
    - Concern, clarity, control, communication
  - Create templates
  - Draft media procedures memo
    - Only approved media spokespeople!





# What Goes Into a Holding Statement

- Rule #1: Convey empathy
- Rule #2: Don't forget rule #1
- Less is more...keep it short
- No need to recite what is already known
- Demonstrate control over the situation
- Identify what steps your organization has taken
- Emphasize proper procedures



# The Seven Deadly Sins of Crisis Communications

# 1. Not Hearing the Ground Rumble

- Many crises start from within
  - Labor unrest
  - Operational weaknesses
  - Personnel issue
- Good leaders should be listening for trouble within their organizations and open to feedback from customers or client
- Not monitoring social media
- Ignoring the warning signs



## 2. Not Preparing for Crises

- Every aging services organization must have a crisis plan
- The plan should identify crisis team members and roles and include draft holding statements
- Even without a plan, get ahead of issues that could become a crisis; don't wait to call in resources until after the crisis hits
- “I just got off the phone with a Times reporter and they asked me hard questions for about 30 minutes. I thought I could use some crisis planning help.”

# 3. Ignoring the Threat of a Crisis

- Not thinking about a potential crisis won't make it go away
- A major news story is not “yesterday's news” or “fish wrap” – it is a major threat to your corporate reputation
- It takes 20 years to build a good reputation and 20 minutes - or 20 seconds - to destroy it
- Get to the bottom of the issue, learn the causes and solutions, and issue a statement to ensure that you have a voice in the story

# 4. Taking the Word from the Field as Gospel

- Question every piece of information that you get
- Talk to everyone who was involved
- Assume it will take a day to get the full set of facts
- Buy time with your holding statement



# 5. No Comment

- No comment equals guilt!
- Saying “no comment” tells the reader or viewer that you have nothing to say in response, that the assertions in the news account must be correct
- Find something to say – legal can approve the most minimal of statements
- If you can’t comment, explain why ...
  - Due to federal privacy laws, we cannot provide any information on a patient or even confirm whether someone is a patient

# 6. Sitting for an Interview Unprepared

- You or your team should know what the interviewer is likely to ask and any rabbit holes that they may venture down
- Internalize your message before the interview begins
- "Bridge" back to your messages
- Do not speculate, hypothesize or guess at an answer
- Establish a time limit for the interview upfront and adhere to it



# 7. Not Learning from the Crisis

- More learning comes from the crisis debrief than just about anything else
- Figure out the root causes of the crisis and put a plan in place to address them; fix the stumbling blocks
- Determine if relationships need to be rebuilt or improved in the wake of the crisis and take appropriate action
- Identify opportunities in the future for reaching back out to journalists to demonstrate to them improvements in processes or progress made



# Crisis Rules of Thumb

- Prepare for the worst-case scenario; hope for the best
- Be as direct, transparent and straightforward as possible
- Talk only when you have a true command of the facts; avoid early conjecture: “We’ll be back in business in a month.”
- Rely on media holding statements before all facts become known




# More Crisis Rules of Thumb

- Have a strong team of advisers before a crisis emerges
- Have an understanding with advisors that they will be available to you in a crisis
- Continually assess your organization for risk
- Be prepared to walk the line between insurers and legal advisors - who may want you to say nothing - and PR/crisis communications advisors, who have your reputation as their greatest concern



The best way to  
manage a crisis is...





...Never having  
one in the first  
place

# Crisis Avoidance

- Build a culture of communication and collaboration, which comes from the top down
- Compliance is critical - urge ethical behavior at every turn
- Don't let problems fester - create a way for managers to report on what is keeping them up at night
- Strong, proactive HR leadership
- Good organizations weather crises well

# Thank You!

## HOW TO REACH US

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