



## IN-BRIEF

### Transparency in Crisis Management— The Houston Experience



“Greater transparency consistently result[s] in higher levels of perceived organizational credibility as opposed to when the same [crisis] strategy [is] used in conjunction with a low transparency message.... organizational transparency during a crisis, ...is in the organization’s strategic interests.”

— Holland et al., *Public Relations Review*, 2021

#### Introduction

Scandals at large organizations have proven time and time again that the free flow of information both internally and externally is required for effective and ethical behavior.

This brief is designed to provide crime laboratory leaders and others who may find themselves at the forefront of a crisis response with a better understanding of how to be transparent. It provides an overview of how transparency is incorporated into the various aspects of crisis management, including first-hand commentary from the Houston Forensic Science Center (HFSC), which has used transparency as the cornerstone to its crisis management strategy<sup>1</sup>. This document is not intended to serve as a framework for handling a crisis. Instead, it provides lessons learned that are helpful in understanding and developing an individual laboratory or agency’s crisis management strategy. For any crisis, organizations are strongly encouraged to consult with their legal counsel, public affairs, and internal affairs officers before responding. However, this brief will highlight the following:

1. Encouraging Transparency
2. Preparing for a Crisis
3. Establishing a Crisis Response
4. Fostering a Culture of Acceptance

#### Objectives

- ▶ Highlight the advantages of transparent communication strategies.
- ▶ Give examples of properly using transparency in a communication plan.
- ▶ Provide guidance on developing an effective crisis strategy.

*A Past to Present Story: Nearly 20 years ago, a ceiling leaked over evidence in the Houston Police Department’s crime laboratory.*

*Years later, an image of missing ceiling tiles would remain linked to the laboratory that had become infamous for being “The Worst Crime Lab in the Country,” according to the New York Times<sup>2</sup>.*

*Even though Houston Police Department repaired the ceiling, spent millions to fix laboratory processes, and eventually created an independent board of directors to oversee forensic services, the image of that leaky ceiling in the scandal-ridden crime laboratory lingered for many years until transparency became priority.*

*Today, this laboratory operates as the Houston Forensic Science Center.*



**Transparency: The First Step to Providing the Answers to Your Staff's Questions — “Why did this happen?” “How do we make it go away?” “How do we move beyond that image so the public can focus on the change and the progress we’ve made?”**

—Peter Stout  
HFSC, President and CEO

## 1. Encouraging Transparency

The HFSC replaced the Houston Police Department Crime Laboratory after a highly publicized scandal that focused on destroyed evidence, unqualified criminalists, and altered laboratory results. From the outset, the newly formed HFSC's board of directors decided to be transparent and embrace its obligations under state and federal open meeting and public information laws. By welcoming laws that require most government records and meetings to be public—laws that many other public agencies tend to bristle against or even look for loopholes to avoid—HFSC's board sent a clear message that they would be different.

Transparency became a part of the mission. The laboratory management, beginning with the chief executive officer (CEO), wove this philosophy into every aspect of the HFSC. The [Center's website](#) is an excellent example of increased openness because anyone can explore the science behind HFSC's daily activities. Everything—from standard operating procedures to blind quality control programs to quality incident findings—is freely available to the public. HFSC's goal was to be equally transparent, internally and externally.

HFSC's CEO and President, Dr. Peter Stout, also regularly reminds HFSC staff about where they came from, highlighting that they should not deny or hide from the past but embrace it, talk about it, and include it in the Center's transparency. He also regularly notes that there is nothing inherently easy about being open and honest, emphasizing that even when staff fully embrace transparency, it is never comfortable.

One slip in HFSC's openness, one attempt to hide or cover up a mistake, and the leaky ceiling will again be featured in the first paragraph of the news story regardless of the quality of their laboratory work.

This transparency causes staff, directors, managers, and supervisors to feel exposed with each new crisis. For example, staff are affected each time there is a termination such as an analyst who shredded case notes.<sup>3</sup> With this event, HFSC notified the media and the public by issuing a news release that was broadcast on the evening news. The broadcast included the name of the staff member involved and incident details. Like everyone else, staff react with frustration and disappointment when faced with acts committed by a few individuals and the damage these acts inflict on the justice system, HFSC, the families of both victims and defendants, and the community.

Many staff who have been at HFSC for a few rounds of this process now see the benefit. The media tends to get tired of stories after one news cycle, and although it is painful while it lasts, the media often focuses on the corrective actions or improvements HFSC has made to

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avoid a similar situation. Occasionally, HFSC has even been credited by the news media for being transparent and issuing a news release on its own.

This process has distinguished HFSC's present from its past. The epithet "scandal-ridden" is now reserved mainly for references that predate April 2014, before HFSC took over management of what had been the Houston Police Department's crime laboratory. The city created HFSC to repair the damage done by decades of mismanagement. The board of directors decided transparency would be the central component of its operational philosophy. As a result, HFSC has built a reputation of quality. Now, the media turns to HFSC to speak with forensic experts. Dr. Stout is regularly sought for questions about marijuana, opioids, toxicology, Rapid DNA, and other issues of national importance. Furthermore, HFSC staff are routinely asked to present at forensic conferences, schools, camps, museums, and various community events and programs.

### HFSC Policies Emphasize Transparency

An agency that wants to use transparency as the foundation of its crisis communication plan and strategy must cultivate a culture of transparency throughout the organization. Furthermore, the organization's policies, actions, and language must reflect the fundamental nature of transparency for the strategy to succeed.

The first sentence in HFSC's media policy states, "It is the policy of Houston Forensic Science Center (HFSC) to operate in a transparent manner, to provide accountability to the public and to comply with Texas law."

From the start, HFSC opened its doors to the media, granting interviews with staff and access to the facility, but it quickly became apparent that to be truly transparent and to use that transparency to regain public trust, HFSC had to employ what former vice-chair Sandra Guerra Thompson dubbed "radical transparency."

When the executive team gathered to discuss the organization's goals, it created the following 20-year vision statement:

*HFSC will lead the forensic science community through innovation, transparency, and by exceeding quality standards.*

Although openness is crucial to HFSC's success, it is also a substantial burden and responsibility as HFSC must continue to meet the public's expectation of full transparency. Should HFSC fail to meet this expectation, criticism from the media and the community will be quick and harsh, and the subsequent road to recovery will be more difficult.

## 2. Preparing for Crisis

The first step in preparing for any crisis is creating a foundation and culture that will allow you to overcome the situation. Planning and preparation should begin before the crisis occurs or is even known. Constantly cultivating a culture of transparency, building and nurturing relationships with stakeholders—including the public and the media—and having a reputation of honesty will ease the response to a crisis.

Before an organization begins crisis planning, it should form a management team that includes its public information officer and legal counsel. This team should understand the internal workings of the laboratory and work to build positive relationships with the media, public, and other community members. When crisis strikes, this team should be notified immediately and tasked with leading the organization through the event by relying on these previously established relationships to foster a softer landing. In many organizations, this same team helps shape the internal culture of transparency.

## 3. Establishing A Crisis Response

Each crisis is unique. An organization experiencing a crisis must adapt to the immediate situation to respond appropriately.



## Deciding on a Strategy

Preparing for and crafting a crisis response strategy requires considering multiple factors. The first is the audience. Asking questions like, “Who is most affected by the error?”; “Which communities need to know this information?”; and “Who needs to know first?” can help establish who the audience(s) should be and inform the messaging.

The second factor is the strategy for engaging with the audience. The organization should decide which channels to use to share the message. Although traditional news outlets should be prioritized, they are not the only option.<sup>4</sup> For example, people increasingly turn to Twitter as a “real-time global newswire for individuals and organizations” because it “allows for information to travel faster... than other traditional media channels.”<sup>5</sup> However, whether the focus is on traditional or social media, a multi-pronged response is generally the best. Proper use of all communication outlets (i.e., traditional media, social media, newsletters, website updates, and targeted public relations activities) emphasizes the importance of the message and the organization’s relationship with its stakeholders.

The third factor is the order of notification. Although the media is arguably the most critical audience because they are the public’s primary source of information in many cases, an organization often needs to inform other stakeholders and staff first. Note that HFSC and other forensic agencies often need to notify law enforcement and the district attorney before information can be made public.

The timing and manner of informing the staff is also a critical concern. Leadership must be as transparent internally as externally. This means that staff should be notified of “bad” news or a crisis before making it public. Depending on the severity of the situation, an urgent all-staff meeting may be needed or an email from the top executive may suffice. Alternatively, simply sharing the message moments before it is released publicly may be adequate. In any case,

## Questions to discuss with your communications team during a crisis situation:

- ✓ **Who is most affected by the error?** Knowing who might have the strongest reaction to the news will help determine the priority level of informing that audience.
- ✓ **Which communities need to know this information?** Communities, law enforcement agencies, district attorneys, the media, and a plethora of other organizations will want to know this information. An organization responding to crisis needs to tailor the message to each group. For example, a crime laboratory can talk to a police department in a way that might not be understood by the public.
- ✓ **Who needs to know first?** Although it is important to tell all affected parties eventually, be certain to take care of the most vulnerable groups first. Blind-siding your laboratory’s employees by going to the media first is never a good idea.
- ✓ **What strategies are going to be used when interacting with these audiences?** Here, we focus on the message. Consider the tone and language that color normal interactions with each group. Does each group rely on you for technical expertise? Are they expecting an apology? Is an apology appropriate? Should the message concentrate on lessons learned and solutions for future prevention?
- ✓ **What channels will you use to communicate with these audiences?** Choose wisely when deciding which medium to use for each audience. Would your staff want to hear the news from their leader in a meeting or in an email? Will the community be satisfied with an apology via Facebook? Does the group you are trying to reach regularly use platforms like Twitter?



disregarding the organization's staff can be detrimental to its crisis response.

The fourth factor is the message tone. Creating a response that highlights the desired tone of the message (e.g., apology, damage control, victim assistance, lessons learned, a return to normalcy) is critical. The message should be succinct and direct and should provide adequate detail for the audience to understand the situation.

#### Transparency in Messaging

Although there is no one size fits all crisis management plan, all successful strategies share a few commonalities. Perhaps the most prominent shared characteristic of effective crisis management is adopting an open and honest approach to communication.

When transparency is not part of the strategy, the story tends to worsen, and public opinion can dip quickly.

Media interest increases as reporters look for the cover-up and seek to out-scoop one another.

Transparency, when used appropriately, has an inherent trust-building property that can improve the relationship between the organization at fault and the stakeholders impacted by the error. In the example of AirAsia flight

#### Transparency in Alternative Industries

In a media content analysis of the articles surrounding the AirAsia QZ8501 crash, researchers identified many factors that helped improve the public's perception of both the government and the airline industry, including the industry's management and structure, the quality of the information available, strong government leadership, and the appropriate use of information communication technology. However, the strongest factor for maintaining a positive reputation among the public was found to be the openness of the search and rescue process, underscoring the value of transparency during a crisis.<sup>6</sup>

QZ8501, the Indonesian government was the most-cited source of information about the crisis because of its openness surrounding the search and rescue process, which resonated with the public and the media. In this

instance, the tone of the conversation surrounding the event did not spiral negatively (e.g., a drop in public opinion, civil unrest) for the organization at fault or the country. In situations like this, stakeholders turn their attention to damage control, victim assistance, lessons learned, and a return to normalcy.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. Fostering a Culture of Acceptance

Openness and honesty do not come easily. Feelings like shame, guilt, and fear make transparency difficult because those at fault often do not want to admit culpability. Making an agency (and the people within it) vulnerable can lead to feelings of discomfort. However, creating and fostering a culture of acceptance, whether it is acceptance of successes or failures, within an agency or laboratory can improve its relationships with its internal and external stakeholders—Transparency creates value with internal stakeholders (i.e., staff) and external stakeholders (i.e., public).

#### Added Value

In 1985, researchers Blake and Mouton interviewed flight crews to understand the role of openness within a working group. The flight crews were interviewed and split into two categories: those with open communication patterns and those with closed, captain-centric communication patterns. When placed in a flight simulated crisis, the teams that engaged in open communication were more likely to make the correct decisions and avoid a simulated crash. After further investigation, the researchers found that the crews who engaged in open communication did so habitually; as a result, crew members were more willing to provide input. Conversely, crew members who exhibited closed communication patterns had learned from previous experience that their voices would not be heard and were less inclined to provide valuable input.<sup>7</sup>

In this example, the team leader's willingness to create and endorse a transparent workspace improved the safety and reliability of their crew. Extrapolating this pattern to an organization's adoption of a culture of transparency, it is easy to see the value. Employees who feel safe speaking openly with co-workers and



management can offer valuable insight that might otherwise be overlooked.

### Lead by Example

In the case of HFSC, honesty and openness have created a constructive, symbiotic relationship between the Center and the media. HFSC's leadership acts as the facilitator and guardian of an organization-wide commitment to honesty in a deliberate and public effort. Instead of trying to hide human errors, they embrace the reality of the situation and take responsibility when an issue arises. Through this behavior, leaders highlight the benefits of being honest (i.e., creating positive relationships with the media, controlling the tone of the news stories) while underscoring employee protection. This strategy of leading by example provides a sense of security and allows employees to come forward without fear of retribution or punishment when errors arise.

### Conclusion

Although the image of leaking ceiling and a mismanaged crime laboratory may never be forgotten, transparency as part of a forward-thinking communication strategy has helped improve HFSC's public image. Since 2003, when HFSC was dubbed the worst crime laboratory in the country by the *New York Times*, the organization has undergone substantial transformation and growth.<sup>2</sup>

As with any organization navigating radical change, growing pains are inevitable. In each newsworthy event, HFSC leaders learn what works and what does not, which messages resonate and which ones fall flat, and how to explain a situation using language that all will understand. Having honesty as a core pillar in HFSC's vision has helped this organization manage their public image better. Through a proper messaging and dissemination strategy, transparency, and honesty, an organization can preserve its reputation, even after a crisis.

Transparency begins with a staff's willingness to adopt a culture of openness and honesty and a willingness to report errors. To establish this, leadership must weave open and honest communication into every aspect of

forensic laboratory operation. This transparency is essential for an organization to weather a crisis.

Furthermore, leadership must be flexible and adept at adapting a message to a given situation. Organizations that best handle adversity have transparency at the core of their strategy and a willingness to communicate openly and often with stakeholders. These organizations use every tool at their disposal—social media, local newspapers, press releases, public speeches—to craft a clear message that addresses the crisis and acknowledges their role.

Laboratories will always face threats and risks. The true art of crisis management does not reside exclusively in preventing errors but in recovering from inevitable human mistakes. Once a team decides as a group to embrace transparency, the rest will fall into place.



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