

# LEADERSHIP WHEN "IT" HITS THE FAN

Effective Communications in  
Critical Times

by Gerard Braud



**A**S THE FIRST decade of the new millennium draws to a close, 3 media images come to mind for me when you mention the phrase, "leadership when 'it' hits the fan."

First, I see New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani headed through the dust toward the twin towers on September 11, 2001, then I see frustrated New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin after Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005, and thirdly I see dejected Virginia Tech President, Charles Steger, facing the media on April 16, 2007, after 32 people died on his campus.

A great leader should be defined by how he or she performs when 'it' hits they fan and never by popularity. Giuliani was unpopular before September 11<sup>th</sup> and became immensely popular after showing leadership during his city's darkest hours. Meanwhile, Nagin was popular in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina, but became unpopular locally and nationally following his fiasco, during the worst natural disaster in America.

As a journalist for 15 years, I witnessed nearly every type of disaster imaginable. Since leaving journalism in 1994, I've focused on building leaders, through effective communications in critical times.

In every crisis I've witnessed and in every case study I've analyzed, individuals in leadership positions follow distinctive, easy to identify patterns that foreshadow success or failure. Some do their duty, while others are in denial. Some take action, while others are arrogant. If a leader does their duty and takes action, then their constituents (employees, stakeholders, etc.) will be responsible. However, when the person in the leadership position is in denial and is



arrogant, their constituents blame everyone for the failings that occur, and the individual in denial and showing arrogance also blames everyone for his or her failings.

## Duty vs. Denial

## Action vs. Arrogance

## Being Responsible vs. Blame

Analysis shows Giuliani did his duty, took action, and helped his city be responsible in their response to its tragedy, while Nagin was in denial of the impending doom his city faced, even with 60 hours advance notice. This was compounded by his arrogance in not heeding the evacuation advice of experts. Following the disaster, refugees blamed Nagin while Nagin blamed President Bush and the Federal Government.

At the center of doing it right is planned communications, especially by way of a properly written document called a crisis communications plan. Such a plan dictates rapid communications in the first hour of a crisis using a system of pre-written communications templates for the media, employees and other key audiences.

On April 16, 2007, when asked to assess the Virginia Tech shootings, I told the Wall Street Journal that, “powerful communications before a crisis and rapid communications during a crisis have the ability to move people out of harm’s way and save lives,” noting that rapid communications during the Virginia Tech shooting could have evacuated campus or warned students and faculty to lock down key buildings. Likewise, powerful communications by Nagin prior to Hurricane Katrina could have evacuated the hundreds of thousands of people who stayed behind to suffer in the Louisiana Super Dome or on rooftops in flooded neighborhoods, in the hot August heat.

One might think I have a crystal ball for foretelling disasters. Fifteen years before Hurricane Katrina, as a New Orleans television reporter, I aired a series of reports warning of the impending doom and flooding that would befall the town where I was born. (See “When the Big One Hits” on the Gerard Braud YouTube channel.) Likewise, 2 years before the Virginia Tech shootings, I warned universities that most were using flawed crisis communications plans. As I watched the Virginia Tech tragedy

unfold, a Google search revealed VT was using the same flawed plan I warned against.

The best way to exhibit leadership in a crisis is to plan ahead, starting with a three plan approach including a crisis communications plan, an incident command plan and business continuity plan. Most organizations are up to date on their incident command and business continuity plans, but most fail to plan for speaking to the media, employees, and other key audiences.

My crisis communications plans usually have 100 or more pre-written and pre-approved templates, each containing the words a leader would use to communicate when “it” hits the fan, especially during the early hours of a crisis when emotions and anxiety are high. The best time to write such templates is on a clear sunny day and the worst time to write and formulate your words is in the throes of a crisis.

Managing a business and making money are too often the characteristics executives consider the mark of a good leader. In my world, a leader is someone who uses effective communications in critical times to get us through what may be our darkest hours, so we can emerge into a bright new day. ■

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Gerard Braud is known as the guy to call when “it” hits the fan. He is widely regarded as an expert in crisis communications and media relations. He has appeared on television more than 5,000 times and has been quoted in more than 500 publications around the world. Additional resources are available at [www.braudcommunications.com](http://www.braudcommunications.com).