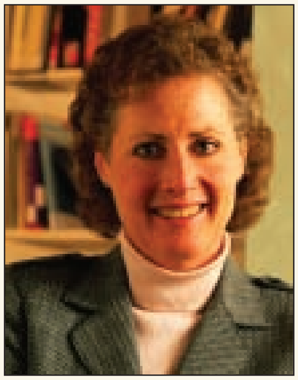
A New Beginning



As many of you know, I will be leaving BoardSource in late April to spend more time with family and friends and to travel to new, exotic places. My decision was possible because BoardSource is stronger than ever and is making a tangible difference in our sector and in the individual boardrooms of the organizations we serve.

In 2006, we saw the launch of the largest consulting and training partnership in BoardSource's history and a sold-out crowd of more than 700 nonprofit leaders at the BoardSource Leadership Forum. We made a foray into e-publishing, allowing users to select, purchase, and download governance content that they can tailor to their needs. BoardSource's membership grew to more than 11,600, and Web visitors exceeded 415,000, indicating that an expanding group of nonprofit leaders finds value in our resources.

I believe that 2007 will be another banner year for BoardSource as we roll out a host of initiatives, including new consulting services based on our flagship publication *The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards*. With such a bright future, the organization is well positioned for new leadership.

I hope that you will continue your generous tradition of support to BoardSource. Accountability and impact are the watchwords for the foreseeable future, and nonprofit boards and BoardSource have a central role to play in helping nonprofits succeed at both.

The friendship and support that you have given me and BoardSource over the years have made all of our work and success possible. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Deborah S. Hechinger

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President & CEO, BoardSource

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Submit your responses to *Board Member®* articles to editor@boardsource.org. Responses may be posted online at www.boardsource.org.

Communicating in a Crisis

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Board members have a fiduciary duty to exercise a high standard of care in managing the organization's money and property. In an emergency, this duty should extend to helping the organization manage its communication with key stakeholders: customers, members, strategic partners, employees, regulators, news media, and the community. The more chaotic things get, the more the board and senior staff need to coordinate their communication efforts.

Two key crisis communication needs are a notification process and message content. Both are addressed in a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP). The CCP is designed to help the organization's leaders answer: What do we know? What are the issues? What are the concerns of our stakeholders? What will people need to and want to know? What actions do we need to take? What messages do we need to convey about the situation and our actions? What modes should we use to reach our stakeholders? How can we be credible? The board's responsibility prior to a crisis is twofold: to be sure that there is a CCP and to know its own role in helping the organization through a crisis.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has developed a comprehensive crisis communication training program. It states that "all crisis communication planning must be designed to help you manage the first 48 hours of an emergency…" The program's mantra of "be first, be right, be credible" summarizes this approach.

Being *first* means getting your message out first, which allows you to control its content and accuracy. This is a huge challenge in this day of immediate "news" from camera cell phones and the Internet. If you are late, others will fill in the blanks with rumors or their own perception of reality, which may be incomplete or biased against you. Then you will have to clean up the mess by countering rumors or myths, draining time and energy from dealing with the critical incident. Being first carries more weight than all messages that come after, similar to being first to the marketplace with a new product. It also helps stabilize the situation, not to mention solidifying your organization's good reputation.

Being *right* means saying and doing the right thing after gathering facts to help you understand exactly what has happened. Many advise that saying less is better. Avoid giving out too many details too early because details generate questions and increase the probability that you'll say the wrong thing. But don't purposely mislead by saying less! As Jack Welch says in his book *Winning*, "There are no secrets in the world, and everyone will eventually find out everything." While saying less will appease your attorneys, balance that with what is really needed. Welch went on to say, "The more openly you speak about the problem, its causes, and its solutions, the more trust you earn from everyone watching, inside the organization and out."

Being *credible* means being honest, open, and consistent and speaking with one voice. One of the worst communication failures in time of crisis is sending mixed messages from multiple sources. Mixed messages from individual board members and senior staff confuse and lead to doubt and distrust, and they undermine your organization's credibility. Choose *one* spokesperson, such as the chief executive or a board member whose stature as a community leader might lend additional credibility. Your spokesperson should speak sincerely, express empathy, be accountable, show commitment, use consistent facts, and demonstrate competence and expertise.

Crisis communication should never, ever be left to the last minute or done on the spot. A Crisis Communication Plan that is flexible and simple can help you push messages out to the community through the media and project a positive image of how your organization coordinates and communicates its activities — both crisis-related and ongoing. Because of board members' fiduciary duties, you will want to not only share the CCP and any updates with board members, you will want to practice with them too. Role-playing in a noncrisis environment is excellent preparation for the real thing, not to mention an opportunity to sharpen your message in the safety of the boardroom, without cell phone cameras and the glaring lights of the media.

AN EIGHT-STEP PLAN

Try these eight steps to make sure you're ready to deal with unexpected events.

1. Identify a "crisis communication team" that will be in charge of notifications and scripts.
2. Keep an updated list of the organization's key stakeholders.
3. Identify a spokesperson and a backup spokesperson for your organization — is this the chief executive or the board chair? Both? Other? Under what circumstances?
4. Train the spokesperson to deal with interview questions, trick questions, and tough questions.
5. Gather, and keep updated, information about your nonprofit organization (annual reports, fact sheets, news releases, phone books, etc.). The board chair or secretary can serve as the repository for critical backup information.
6. Develop key messages (scripts), tailored to each internal and external stakeholder group.
7. List several alternative message dissemination modes available to you and match them to each stakeholder group.
8. Drill and rehearse your Crisis Communication Plan!

RESOURCES:

First Informers in the Disaster Zone: The Lessons of Katrina by Albert L. May. The Aspen Institute, 2006.

Generating Buzz: Strategic Communications for Nonprofit Boards by Sally J. Patterson. BoardSource, 2006.