

Lessons From WikiLeaks: What Execs Need to Know in a Crisis

by Stephanie Nora White and Rebecca Theim, Special to Portfolio.com Jan 04 2011

The latest rumored WikiLeaks target is in overdrive preparing for what it expects to be a damaging deluge of data. Given that all someone needs to create havoc is access to embarrassing emails and a high-capacity jump drive, isn't it time your organization thinks about who should lead your crisis-response efforts?



Bank of America is bracing itself for the WikiLeaks treatment. Entrepreneurs and executives at other companies might want to do the same.

Image: Illustration by Sean Driscoll

***Editor's Note:** The following [Executive Forum](#) submission represents the opinions of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of Portfolio.com. If you have another viewpoint to share, please offer it in the comments area at the bottom.*

Company crises can often be lumped in with death and taxes—two inevitable events that too many entrepreneurs and business executives don't want to think about until it's too late.

If recent scandals that have plagued corporate America have not yet gotten you thinking about your own company's vulnerabilities, Bank of America's current worries should. The beleaguered company is rumored to be the latest target of [WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who told Forbes](#) late last year that his organization would begin releasing documents about a prominent U.S. financial institution sometime early in 2011. Bank of America's stock [tumbled 3 percent](#) on the first suggestion in late November that the bank was going to be targeted by WikiLeaks. Although the stock has since recovered, BofA remains vulnerable to WikiLeaks fears, the [New York Times reported Monday](#).

For anyone in corporate America thanking his lucky stars that it's only Bank of America in WikiLeaks' crosshairs, think again: Assange told *Forbes* that at least half of the documents provided to the organization belong to corporations.

Got your attention now? Good. It's time to get started on your organization's formalized response in the event of a crisis.

Nothing is as important in a company's crisis-response program as its crisis team and its ability to activate quickly and effectively. Ideally selected from throughout the organization, the crisis team will review, revise, and approve your crisis plan, identify and recruit who should be on the front lines in the event of a crisis, and be prepared to be pressed into service themselves, depending on their individual skills and experience, the type of event, and its severity.

Your team should include:

- **Members of sufficient authority—and credibility—to be taken seriously by the organization and its stakeholders.** If your own employees don't take the team and its work seriously, you'll be defeated before you call the first meeting. Your team shouldn't be exclusively senior executives, but should include members from the organization with either official or informal authority—to both get things done and to speak for the organization.
- **Representatives from every critical function within your organization.** No one understands the threats and vulnerabilities of every part of your company the way your frontline staff does. Make sure to include members from all of your key departments, with special attention to public-facing functions where serious crises can erupt unexpectedly. This includes legal, communications, investor relations, operations, finance, human resources, sales, etc. And when the time comes, take their advice.

Beyond that, what qualities should you look for in your crisis-response team members? As you survey your staff, you and your managers should look for individuals who possess the following:

1. **Flexibility and adaptability.** Nothing is static in a crisis, and your team should thrive on change and be able to focus on putting out fires, large and small.
2. **Empathy and emotional intelligence.** Most crises have victims, which can range from those simply inconvenienced by an event to people killed by it. One of your team's first duties after acknowledging and gathering information about the crisis will be to express regret and empathy and explain how you're going to make the situation right. Having team members who can put themselves in the victims' shoes is invaluable in successfully navigating that part of the process.
3. **Great confidence, but even greater humility.** In this 24/7 world of social media and the Internet, a company is already behind when a crisis occurs. Your team needs individuals comfortable with change and a level of uncertainty, and who are able to make decisions swiftly based on rapidly changing events, often when many of the facts are unknown and may never be known.
4. **Willingness and ability to learn quickly.** No two crises are the same and many can be quite complicated. (If you doubt that, quickly explain what a "credit default swap" is, in language your mother could understand.) And no matter how well you plan, your efforts will not specifically address every single kind of crisis that could strike your company. Having team members who can quickly get up to speed on complex scenarios with many moving parts is critical.

5. **Calm, cool, and collected disposition in the face of chaos.** You need clearheaded thinkers who respond well to pressure and are able to keep that clear head when pandemonium is the situation du jour. But don't assume this requirement means you should eliminate passionate employees from consideration. Passion doesn't automatically squelch calm, and you'll need passion to do the hard work, make the tough decisions, and put your organization on the road to recovery after the crisis has abated.

6. **Creativity.** While planning for a crisis and as one unfolds, you'll be confronted with multiple scenarios based on myriad events and consequences. Having creative team members will help you anticipate and develop responses to those possibilities—ideally, even before they erupt.

7. **Strong gut.** Individuals with this quality see the company, crisis, and the world for what they truly are at that point in time and aren't afraid to act appropriately. Which leads to...

8. **Ability to play devil's advocate.** This one can sometimes be politically tricky because executives often don't respond well to challenges from underlings or people looking for all the ways something can go wrong. However, in both crisis planning and crisis response, those are exactly the type of people you want because they will help you identify and effectively respond to even little-known vulnerabilities that could erupt into a disaster.

9. **Seasoned crisis responders.** Nothing replaces the experience of having lived through a crisis. If possible, your team should include those who've served in the role before. If no one has, you should run several prospective team members through intense crisis-response training and drills and depend upon them to share what they learned with the rest of the team.

10. **Stamina.** A common error corporate executives often make is that of "hopeless optimism"—that seductive, yet often perilous, belief that emerges in the midst of a major crisis that a nightmare situation can't get worse. Just ask former BP CEO Tony Hayward whether that's a good feeling to embrace in the midst of a crisis. Your team should include "corporate athletes"—those able to go the distance in what may be a long, uncertain journey.

Once your team is selected and put into place, the real work begins. But implementing the proper response team can go a long way to ensuring that your organization is as prepared as possible for whatever life throws at it.

Stephanie Nora White is a partner in Wixted, Pope Nora, Thompson, Ltd., WPNT, a national business communications, training and strategy consultancy that has worked with Fortune 500 companies to prepare executives and employees to plan for and respond effectively to corporate crises. Rebecca Theim is principal of business communications consultancy Tipitina Communications, Inc., and an associate of WPNT.