

# Crisis – A Fictional Case

**James L. Horton**

On April 20, 2010 at 3:45 pm, the SOSHA petrochemical plant exploded in Camden, New Jersey directly across the Delaware River from South Side Philadelphia. The flash was visible for miles and the report audible for miles beyond that. Gawkers with cell phones took hundreds of pictures and posted images on Facebook of a fireball and boiling column of black smoke. Dozens of tweeters described the scene from Pennsylvania and New Jersey shores. Helicopters from Philadelphia news stations were in the air in minutes and sending live feeds of the conflagration. Bloggers were speculating about damage – shattered windows, leaking chemicals, river pollution, deaths and injuries.

SOSHA's Philadelphia sales office called the VP of communications in his New York office with news of the accident at 4pm, but no one from the plant had alerted him. There was a one-line wire service feed on Associated Press the media relations manager had picked up, but nothing else. The VP of communications launched the crisis plan with calls to the team -- the CEO, CFO, General Counsel, VP in charge of manufacturing and Camden plant manager. His call to the plant manager's office did not go through and a call to the plant manager's cell phone went to voice mail. The VP of communications instructed subordinates to monitor live internet feeds from local TV Philadelphia stations, Google news, Twitter, blogs and Facebook. They were to let him know everything that was happening. The company was already behind the curve in communicating what happened quickly and factually, and the longer he did not hear from the plant, the more events could spin out of control.

He told his media relations manager to prepare a short statement confirming an explosion at the Camden plant and that the company would report further information as soon as it was known. He instructed the manager to get the statement out in 10 minutes to Associated Press, Reuters, Dow Jones, Bloomberg, PR newswire and BusinessWire then to post it on the company's web site and Twitter feed.

He was concerned about plant's managers. He had rehearsed the call chain with them quarterly. The plant manager was the designated spokesperson and had been media trained. The plant manager knew of the necessity to alert the crisis communications team, and he had been prompt in the past in getting emergency messages to headquarters. The VP of communications told his secretary to call the cell numbers of the senior managers. Only the assistant plant manager answered, and he was in Tampa on vacation. Meanwhile, he sent an all-points internal e-mail alert asking for someone near or at the Camden plant to contact him. Only the Philadelphia sales office replied.

The CEO was tense. The Camden plant was a linchpin of the company's worldwide manufacturing. A thousand employees and contractors worked there. If the plant was out of action, production would have to shift somehow to Barcelona and Santos with the remainder handled by Zeebrugge. Missy, the CEO's assistant, had already ordered a helicopter to the East side heliport and had a car standing by on Park Avenue.

Aerial video on internet feeds showed fire engines on the ground, their flashing lights partially obscured by smoke and flames. A local NBC reporter broadcasting live 100 yards from the main gate didn't know any more than anyone else. The reporter interviewed a local citizen who complained that the plant had been unsafe for years and complaints were ignored. A second reporter from the local ABC channel intercepted a SSHA employee who could only describe a sudden flash and hellish explosion. The employee didn't know how many people were inside nor did he know what part of the plant had erupted. The employee said, "A bunch of people are dead. Have to be. I was by the main gate, and it knocked me over."

Rumors were rushing through the internet. It was a munitions plant. 500 people were killed. Survivors were stumbling through gates and were burned beyond description. Fumes were causing people to sicken and vomit. A green effluent was gushing into the Delaware River and causing water to boil. There were dead fish everywhere. The VP of communications didn't know if any of this was true.

At 4:30 pm when the East coast was watching the furious fireball and fanning cloud on TVs and laptops, the plant fire chief reached the VP of communications by cell phone. Plant offices were flattened. Phone lines and the internet had been cut, and cell phones weren't working well. If the plant manager was in his office, he was dead or injured. Three hundred workers had been accounted for, but there was no word on the other 700. Heat was so intense that fire equipment was positioned two hundred yards from the fire. There were secondary explosions every five minutes. Water mains had been shattered. Five fire departments were on the scene, and rescue operations were underway.

The CEO left for Camden immediately with the VP of manufacturing and VP of communications. On the 45-minute flight south to Camden, more facts emerged. The HR manager and most of her team were unharmed and were working to account for survivors, injured and dead. She had verified 400 living, of whom several dozen were injured. There were 15 ambulances on the scene. The fireball was located near the center of the plant, and was contained within the fence. Firemen were using breathing gear as a precaution. Hoses were being run from city hydrants into the plant, and trucks were pumping water into the flames and on nearby equipment to keep it from melting. Secondary explosions had decreased. Three people were confirmed dead but their identities were being withheld from the media pending notification of their families. A location for reporters had been set up 100 yards from the plant gate behind police lines. The plant fire chief had given an impromptu press conference and reported the deaths. Television reporters were running amok interviewing survivors and anyone else willing to talk about the plant. Most of the interviews were negative. Internet buzz was wildly off the mark with self-appointed "experts" concluding there must have been sabotage.

At 5:30 pm, the helicopter landed near the burning plant, and the CEO met immediately with the HR director. The plant manager was missing but 15 of 30 executive staff had made their way out of the wrecked office building. Several departments were unaccounted for. Search and rescue was picking through the rubble. The VP of

communications went to the plant fire chief and told him he would take over communications coordination. The VP of manufacturing went to inspect what he could of the plant.

The VP of communications then huddled with the CEO and HR manager in a quick meeting. They concluded that:

- They would hold an hourly press conference at the media location as long as there was news to report and rumors to control.
- The CEO would be the spokesperson until further notice. He was good with the media, and he had handled emergencies before. The VP of communications would be his backup.
- The CEO would make three points:
  - SOSHA was concerned first for the welfare of plant workers. The CEO would report the number of survivors, injured and dead as the facts were confirmed.
  - It was too soon to determine the cause of the explosion and extent of pollution, if any. The company would investigate and provide a full report in the weeks to come.
  - The plant made plastics for which petrochemicals were feedstocks. There was toxicity in chemicals used, and the company was taking precautions accordingly.
  - The company would supply to the media the facts as it was able to verify them, but it would not speculate.
- The VP of communications would be the fact gatherer and verifier in contact with the HR manager, the plant fire chief, the police captain, the VP of manufacturing and emergency medical services on the scene.

The CEO met with reporters at 6:15 pm in time for early evening newscasts. He read a prepared statement confirming that five were dead, 400 were accounted for and the rest remained missing. He said SOSHA would do what it took to help the families of the injured and deceased. He parried questions on the cause of the explosion. He explained the kinds of plastics the plant made and the toxicity of chemicals. He stressed that the company would report facts to the media as it was able to verify them.

The CEO stayed on the scene giving hourly press conferences until 2 am when the fire was brought under control and 95 percent of the plant's workers had been accounted for. The VP of communications remained on duty for 18 hours, coordinating information, talking to reporters, knocking down rumors, communicating to the New York office that was filing updates on the company's web site every 15 minutes, Tweeting new information and answering and logging media calls.

Six months later the cause of the explosion was traced to a defective valve. OSHA fined the company for inadequate plant maintenance. Ten people had died, including the plant manager, his secretary and three other managers who had participated in quarterly crisis communications drills. Four hundred were injured, some seriously, requiring

hospitalization. The Camden community mobilized to shut the plant down, and \$500 million in lawsuits were filed with more expected. SOSHA was working with the state and local government to keep the plant open and had set up a fund for the families of the dead and injured. The CEO appointed a task force to investigate the accident and to examine policies and procedures. Among them was the crisis communications plan.

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Questions to consider:

1. Is it possible to control crisis communications in an era of instant messaging?
2. Were the company's key messages the right ones?
3. What were the failings of the crisis communications plan?
4. What should the communications director do to ensure that he gets immediate notice in the future?
5. What would you do in revising the crisis communications plan?