

# Well, so THAT Happened: Four Rules for Crisis Management

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**A** windstorm slams through town knocking the iconic fiberglass cow statue off your sign. An act of violence occurs near your organization. A baby hippo is born 5 weeks early. A gorilla is killed by staff after a toddler falls into its enclosure.

A crisis can occur at any time, at any place. While your organization can prepare responses for the most likely scenarios, it is impossible to prepare for **all** scenarios. Crises are by definition unplanned and almost always unexpected. The damage they cause can be minimal and short-term, or have a long lasting impact on your institution. You will have no trouble identifying what is or is not a crisis—although it may take public response to clue you in to the level of response needed.

Of the examples listed above, you probably have only heard of the last two—Fiona and Harambe—because of the reputation and size of the institution involved, the public response level, and because of the extreme nature of the incidents. These were indeed crises—but comparatively speaking, no more or less so than the loss of the fiberglass cow or the localized act of violence.

**Rule #1:**  
**Our institutions are unique, therefore what we consider a crisis is also unique and our responses must be tailored to fit our institution.**

When a windstorm blew through Yellow Springs, Ohio in 2016 knocking the iconic Young's Dairy Farm cow (named Jersey) from her perch no one could have guessed at the public response to the damage. This could have been one more story about the loss of a childhood icon, the passing of time, or the end of an era and Jersey would have gone the way of the Dodo...but it didn't. Young's Dairy staff used the opportunity—through hilarious social media posts—to document the repairs, life on the farm, activities, and history. People were interested, and they visited the Dairy. By the time Jersey was reinstalled, interest was such that news crews covered the celebration and a crowd gathered for pictures with Jersey beforehand. A year later, Young's continues to post updates continuing the relationship with new guests.

What? Losing a fiberglass cow doesn't sound like a crisis to you? That's ok...it doesn't have to. But now imagine your mascot, favorite collection item or piece of art instead. Our crises are ours.

**Rule #2:**  
**Prepare—and practice—for what you can**

The second crisis above is a great example of planning and practicing for what you can...because you can't plan for everything.

After 9/11 an institution realized that because of its geographical location, there was a chance that it could be affected by other attacks—in fact it was highly probable. So a team spent a full year planning and preparing for what could come next: a campus-wide policy put into place, weekly meetings to practice various scenarios, incredibly gross emergency food reserves taste-tested (ick) and specialized training for staff implemented.

In 16 years no further attacks have occurred to test all the preparations. Time and energy and money poorly invested? No. The result was that the planning and preparation developed an overarching understanding of how to respond to **any** crisis. Yes, the circumstances between a dirty bomb and a fire are different, but the mechanisms put into place, and the skills honed were applicable across the board.

Most institutions will never be faced with this extreme example, but you **can** brainstorm and then plan for the most probable crisis scenarios your institution might face. Identify them, create your management plan, budget for the possibility and every year review them for updates. You may find that in 5 years certain scenarios no longer rise to the top and are replaced by others. That is to be expected. The world changes; don't let your plans gather dust.

**Rule 3:**  
**Understand your audience**

When the toddler fell into the gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Gardens, the animal rapid response team did what they were trained to do: assess the situation **quickly** and act to save the child. The backlash was severe for many reasons—all debated, analyzed and discussed on the news, across social media and in living rooms. The zoo communications team fought an uphill battle despite planning and training, because while you can plan and prepare for specific scenarios (see Rule #2) you cannot always anticipate the public response level (see Rule #1). Coming so soon after the Cecil the Lion intentional sport killing, it was hard for the zoo communications team to differentiate to the public between the two deaths in a way that could be summed up in 140 characters or a meme.

The Zoo learned a very hard and valuable lesson about their audience and their **potential** audience from the death of Harambe, and was able to use that knowledge with the premature birth of Fiona. It is hard to escape Fiona...she is everywhere. Happy, playful, "pinch your cheeks you are soooo cute" adorable...and alive. One year after the demands for NO zoos ever, the Zoo did what it always does: capitalize on impending birth of a baby to get the "awwwwww" factor. BiBi's pregnancy was no different with baby-cam placed and appropriate social media posts. Until Fiona came way too soon.

Zoo staff was able to do what they could not in the case of Harambe—show their knowledge and commitment to the animals

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in their care. With Harambe, the decision had to be made fast, and he was gone. No one saw the mourning of his care team or the hours and hours of training that went into the rapid response team's actions. With Fiona, the 24/7 dedication was there for us all to watch and experience vicariously. And we did. Handling Fiona's birth and first year as they did has created a deep well of support for this Zoo and others. They exponentially increased both financial support and community spirit **and** knowledge about what a modern Zoo should be doing: conservation. The outcome was beyond thought only a year before. Know. Your. Audience.

### **Rule 4: Know what you do not know**

Many of our OLHA members are all-volunteer or small staff. It is hard enough to put out the "right now" fires without trying to plan for the "may never actually happen" fires. The good news is that there are resources available to help—many of them **free!** For example, Ohio Local History Alliance can hook you up with an Americorps member to help you evaluate and plan for **your** highly probably crises.

But when there is an immediate need, do you—and your institution—a favor call in the professionals. There are consultants available to help you respond to an immediate need. Would you utilize their services for a cow falling off in a windstorm? Probably not. But what if you run a day camp and there is an incident with a child? Yes. The best way to avoid long-term damage is to be willing to bring in professionals. Accept you don't have all the answers and that is ok; but identify, cultivate and put on speed-dial someone who **does** know.

Have a great story about crisis management to share? Go over to the OLHA Members Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/groups/OhioLHAMembers](http://www.facebook.com/groups/OhioLHAMembers)) and do so...we learn so much more when we share with our OLHA community!

Here are a few resources to get you started:

- [boardsource.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Crisis-Communication.pdf](http://boardsource.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Crisis-Communication.pdf)
- [strengtheningnonprofits.org/resources/guidebooks/Managing\\_Crisis.pdf](http://strengtheningnonprofits.org/resources/guidebooks/Managing_Crisis.pdf)
- [esc-cincinnati.org/](http://esc-cincinnati.org/)
- [www.c4npr.org/](http://www.c4npr.org/)