

Managing a Series of Critical Incidents

**BUSINESS LESSONS
FROM THE DC BELTWAY**

SNIPER INVESTIGATION



by Michael R. Bouchard

In October 2002, one year after the Washington DC terrorist attack on the Pentagon, residents of the area once again found themselves under assault. This time, the attack lasted 23 days when two individuals randomly shot and killed 10 innocent people and wounded three more. This was the first major multi-jurisdictional crisis that many public officials faced. Officials later found the pair had shot several other people across the U.S.

Crisis managers, as well as state, local, and federal officials, found themselves dealing with an unfamiliar situation because this series of incidents spanned several jurisdictions and continued for more than three weeks. There was no “playbook” to refer to, nor was there a crisis management plan in place to deal with random shootings across three states within a 90 mile radius. In fact, there was no plan to deal with such a prolonged crisis that affected so many people in so many communities.

This is what law enforcement and other public officials faced in October 2002. Within two days, six homicides by gunshot occurred, spanning two communities. A few days later, a victim was wounded with the same rifle nearly 50 miles from the original shootings. Several days later, a child was shot in another community walking into his school causing even more anxiety and fear. The school shooting was the first incident where the “snipers” corresponded with the investigation team. Unfortunately, the message was leaked to the press, which further complicated the investigation.

Another few days later, several other shootings occurred within a 90 mile radius of Washington DC and the “snipers” left two more letters at the scenes for the investigating team. They demanded a ransom of ten million dollars and stated that “your children are not safe anywhere at anytime.” If the ransom was not paid, or their messages were leaked to the press, they promised more murders. Negotiation attempts were undertaken, the letters were leaked to the media, and the ransom was not paid. Unfortunately, the “snipers” chose to kill additional people.

After the DC Beltway Sniper case was concluded, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) published an extensive after action report citing numerous lessons learned, applicable to both public and private sectors. To prepare those of us in the private sector, we need to ask ourselves: “Does my crisis management plan enable my company to manage multiple events at the same time? Does my plan incorporate shared leadership across multiple sites?”

There are several lessons learned from this case that apply to the private sector:



Above, duo who killed innocent people. Left – John Allen Muhammad, right – Lee Boyd Malvo

Build Relationships Before a Crisis Occurs.

Because most of the police chiefs in the DC area met regularly as a group, they had good relations before the incidents occurred. This was a success story because these relationships helped the information sharing process. This same lesson can be applied to private security. For example, if a series of attacks are made against a certain industry, each company must be prepared to work closely with the staff of other offices, or, in some cases, that of their competitors. They must also be prepared to deal with the local, state, and federal law enforcement authorities who will be charged with handling the criminal investigation. The time to exchange calling cards and begin a dialogue is before, not after an incident occurs. The relationships should be built ahead of time and nurtured to ensure the best response to an incident. A good example of an outstanding public/private relationship is in the Minneapolis/ St. Paul area where many large companies are based. They have regular meetings involving key players from numerous companies, as well as those who represent the public sector. They rotate their meetings giving each member the opportunity to host the event and educate the others about their best practices and capabilities. The meetings are used to exchange intelligence and to make each other aware of how they each prepare for incidents

Integrate Information Systems.

The most significant hindrance faced by the DC Sniper investigators was the difficulty in managing all of the information and diverse systems wherein this information was housed. For example, over 23 days, 116,000 calls and email tips were received resulting in roughly 16,000 leads. More than 1,000 investigators were assigned to the case. Twelve local law enforcement departments, two state police departments, five federal agencies, at least six district attorneys and three U.S. attorneys' offices were involved in the initial investigation. As the case evolved, more departments became involved in different states. After the pair was apprehended, the investigation team found they had been stopped by local police in several locations and had been photographed by public cameras in several locations near the shootings. The problem was, the systems were not all integrated and it took a tremendous amount of time to pour through each system where the information was housed. We all must consider the types

of systems we may need to use, determine what systems our potential partners may use, identify the types of information we need from these systems, and be prepared to integrate and exploit the information if it becomes necessary.

Determine Who Your Spokesperson Will Be.

During the DC Sniper investigation, federal officials were involved in press conferences, however the spokesperson was typically the local police chief where the incident occurred. The uniformed police chief represented an identifiable position of authority to the community. This, in turn, provided a level of comfort and familiarity for the local community. A trusted spokesperson makes people feel safe when they speak to them. Every incident will be different, therefore, we must prepare for a variety of scenarios. In some cases, the event merits the presence of the CEO. However, if the CEO is not experienced in speaking with the media, he/ she should receive adequate training and rehearse before each event with a team who will prepare him/ her with the tough questions that may be asked. Does your plan include a chief spokesperson at each site? Do your plans account for multiple sites where several spokespersons may be involved?

Carefully Prepare Your Messages.

In my opinion, one of the most important lessons learned from the DC Sniper case involved communication. People in the area were terrified. They just experienced two successive years where their communities were subject to significant attacks. People were afraid to go outside and they were afraid to pump gas because many of the snipers' victims were killed at the gas pumps. After the child was shot walking to school, parents feared sending their kids to school. Parents struggled with how to explain these types of events to their children. After

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school activities stopped and weekend sporting events were cancelled. As a result, the DC area underwent a significant economic downturn because people simply did not leave their homes. We must ensure our crisis management plan accounts for proper communication to alleviate our employees' fears. A solid plan ensures the media relations staff is involved in the entire process, including the rehearsal of plans. Does your plan address how you will alleviate public fear of using your product if your company or industry comes under attack?

In addition to addressing our employees and the public, we must be prepared to deal with the media. The rise in 24 hour media coverage has made the news media much more competitive and ever present. We can no longer rely on speaking to local reporters that we have worked with before. When a major incident occurs, particularly one that gains national or international attention, you will be overwhelmed with media requests. In 23 days in October 2002, the DC Sniper Task Force gave credentials to more than one thousand news correspondents who were based at the Montgomery County, Maryland Police headquarters. Every major news network was there, every major newspaper was there. The talk shows were inundated with self-proclaimed "experts" who cast their opinions on what the "snipers" looked like, how they were trained, and what their motives were. At times, the media inadvertently helped shape the opinions of the public; in fact, the task force could tell how much of an impact the media achieved, based on the tips and leads that were called in after a shooting. If you don't prepare for this type of activity, you will place yourself at significant disadvantage. Learning to work with the media can be one of the most challenging tasks you will face.

Many feel it is easier to ignore the media than to work with them. This is the wrong approach. While the media can certainly hurt you, they can also help you. For example, during this case, leaks of information overwhelmed the task force leaders. At times, the public opinion turned against the investigation team. To change that, the task force commanders modified their daily messages to not only provide accurate and timely infor-



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mation, but to present facts in such a fashion as to build confidence and show progress in the investigation. In fact, the task force leaders used the media to engage the shooters in a dialogue which led to their arrest.

Many of us watched the BP media relations activities develop during and after the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010. I am confident they must have felt they were prepared to deal with a major incident such as this oil spill. Yet, look at how the public opinion turned against them after one of their senior leaders had a slip of the tongue during an informal media session. Are your leaders prepared to deal with the media during a crisis? If the crisis occurs across multiple sites, even in different countries, do your media relations employees understand the local cultures so they can craft their messages carefully?

Know Your Limits.

Most crisis managers are confident in their abilities. When each crisis management plan is developed, risks are weighed and appropriate actions are formulated to respond adequately to an incident(s). Planners should be creative and

identify all potential assets that may be required to respond to an incident. The most important thing to remember is that crisis management teams must know their limitations and know when to ask for help. This coincides with building relations with those who can assist you. A good example in the public sector is mutual aid pacts with surrounding fire departments. This can be accomplished in the private sector by identifying assets that others may have which can either be purchased or borrowed during emergencies.

While the DC Beltway Sniper Investigation after action report did not offer all the answers, it helped law enforcement officials plan for similar types of events involving multiple jurisdictions. Many of these same lessons learned can be applied to each of our companies. It simply takes some creative thinking to incorporate the risks we may face.

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