

Crisis Communication:

How to Let Opinion Diversity Show

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1. *Don't muzzle anyone.* In a crisis, the media will find sources with a wide range of views. Individuals similarly mobilize their own information networks of friends and neighbors. It is usually futile to try to muzzle potential sources. They'll probably end up talking anyway; even if they don't, their reticence will give the impression of cover-up, while outliers who are willing to comment will have that much more impact.
2. *Instead, let everyone tell what they know and what they think.* Devote substantial effort to briefing everyone you can. Include even your critics on the briefing list. Instead of trying to keep people muzzled, try to keep them up-to-speed.
3. *Let the internal decision-making process show.* If the decision was obvious and everyone agreed, say so. If the decision was tough and reached only after robust debate, say that. Don't just permit the dissent to show. Go out of your way to make it show, to demonstrate that your organization considered all the options. While this can raise some anxiety, it helps build a more mature alliance with the public.
4. *Let the range of opinion show.* Typically, there is near-consensus on some issues. On other issues there is considerable debate. "Most people thought either A or B, a few argued C, but there was virtually no support for D or E or F." Try to communicate both what was debated and what was not.
5. *Don't require revisionist history.* If the decision was made after robust debate, some of those on the losing side probably still think they were right. Don't make them pretend otherwise. They must be willing to explain the final decision and its rationale. But showing that they understand, respect, and will implement the decision doesn't have to mean pretending that they supported it. (Those who do not respect and cannot implement the decision may need to quit or go public.)