

If It Could Happen In Littleton:

Preparing for Another Columbine

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Abstract

While not the first school shooting, the tragedy of the Columbine Massacre was the first in a long line of school shootings that received massive attention from the media, spurring deep analysis into Hollywood films, video games, gun laws and pushed forward interest and pressure in both state and federal legislation regarding school violence. It also influenced schools on the local level and forced officials to ask themselves if they were prepared. Columbine was a mostly white, suburban, upper middle class community. If it could happen there, it could happen anywhere.

Looking at the events of April 20, 1999 and the months that followed, this report analyzes what school and sheriff department officials did right, and where they went wrong. In applying policies, concepts and theories in crisis communication to the actions taken by Jefferson County officials on that day, more detail and clarity can be found regarding the preparation and execution of crisis plans before, during and after a crisis occurs.

While crises like school shootings are rare, the Columbine Massacre has proven that it doesn't matter where a school is located or what type of students attend, every school should be prepared and have a plan should such a horrifying incident occur. Through the description of events from the media, journals looking at the event, and the inside perspective of Marilyn Saltzman, the manager of communication services for Jefferson County Public Schools, this paper will present ways that other schools should not only prepare for such an event happening at their schools, but also how to act should the worst actually come to pass.

Keywords: crisis communication, crisis response, channel selections, crisis typology

Introduction

The second amendment has always been challenged, but never more so than directly after a school shooting. Shocking and unexpected shootings and other violent acts often create a public outcry and sometimes they create legislation that changes the face of the country. One such occurrence was the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan and the near death of his press secretary James Brady. Brady's injuries drove public opinion and politicians in the direction of passing of the Brady Bill, which federally required a waiting period for all handgun purchases.

As time went on, school violence began to occur, including the most shocking and devastating act of violence, school massacres. The press jumped on the classroom killings and the body counts seemingly always rose in an attempt to top the last. The most horrifying loss of life was that of the Bath School Massacre in 1927 in which Andrew Kehoe used explosives, not guns, to murder 38 elementary school children and six adults (Bernstein, 2009). In 1999, two students of Columbine High School planted bombs and launched an assault on their high school and killed 12 students and 1 teacher before ending their own lives.

The public backlash of this tragedy affected not only the country in general but deeply affected those family members and friends of the victims. Laws targeting gun show purchases and the loopholes found there were highly scrutinized and attacked by the press, legislators and lobbyists. Individuals like Tom Mauser, father of one of the victims of Columbine, Daniel Mauser, left his job at the Denver transit authority for a time and became a lobbyist for a gun control organization (Denver Post, 2000). The State of Michigan passed PA 102 that required crisis planning for many types of emergencies and crises, from fire to severe weather to shootings.

Some states instituted character education programs and almost all schools nationwide began to enforce stricter weapon policies (Seeger, Barton, Heyart & Bultnyck, 2001).

Another school shooting will happen. No one can possibly know when or where, but every elementary, middle, high school and university needs to be prepared for such an incident happening at their school. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, students, teachers and faculty were left scrambling for hours, trying to find answers. Parents wanted to know if their son or daughter was one of the victims. Students wanted to know how to reach their parents or loved ones to report their safety. Media outlets pressed the school district and sheriff's office for answers. Misinformation, uninformed guesswork and a knee-jerk reaction led to a momentary shut down of 9-1-1 and other emergency phone lines because the public was given wrong phone number for students to report their safe escape from the school (Shepard, 1999). The mistake was quickly addressed and corrected.

With no real crisis plan intact, communication and public relations personnel were at a loss as to how to handle the situation. This led to poor communication and hours of parents left without the answer to the most heart-wrenching question, "Is my child safe?"

Case Description

On April 20, 1999, two Columbine High School seniors, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, marched into their school with semi-automatic weapons and shotguns, purchased by friends, planted propane bombs and tossed pipe bombs while firing blindly down hallways and targeting students. The students had been planning a massacre of the school for months (Shepard, 1999). The week before, during the high school prom, the killers scratched out the dates of the prom on posters and scribbled in, "April 20...It's coming" (Lessons, 2000). They shot videos of

themselves explaining their plans and showed themselves making preparations for the assault (Gibbs, 1999).

The day of the attack, the two shooters parked their cars and planted timed explosives in them before entering the crowded high school cafeteria to plant their 20-pound propane bomb. They then exited the school and waited. Their intention was to allow the explosives to detonate and shoot surviving students as they exited the building. When the bomb didn't go off, the killers descended upon the school. They first killed Rachel Scott, having lunch with a friend outside. They shot several others as they sat outside. One of the killers would return to one of the students, Daniel Rohrbough which they had injured, and would kill him at point blank range (CNN, 2000).

The two classroom killers then entered the school and began a killing spree that would cover the cafeteria, hallways and the most devastated area, the school library. 9-1-1 calls began to flood in as teachers and students rushed from the gunshots and pipe bombs launched by the killers (CNN, 1999).

When the police dispatch began to come alive with details and 'shots fired' calls, news outlets took notice. The media then started to receive phone calls from concerned parents, family and friends. When a KUSA news reporter called the sheriff's department for more information, the media spokesman told the reporter, "You already know more than I do" (Shepard, 1999).

For the next several hours, the media attempted to find official information from any source it could. Eventually they resorted to taking phone calls from students. One call, from a student identifying himself as Bob Sapin, makes the claim that he is a student who had just

escaped. He is placed on the air twice in one hour. It is discovered months later that he was an unemployed snow boarder from Utah making a prank call (Shepard, 1999).

When news first broke on local Denver news channels of possible shots fired, Klebold and Harris were still rampaging through the school. In just under one hour, the two killers had claimed the lives of twelve students and one teacher before turning their weapons on themselves. The aftermath of the massacre would bring hours of confusion, sorrow and perhaps worst of all, hope.

Due to the bombs placed around the school by the killers, police made very slow progress into the school to search for survivors and assess the damage (CNN, 1999). At one point during the assault, the sheriff's department had even asked for the assistance of one of the local news channels to fly their helicopter over the school so that they could make a survey of the scene (Shepard, 1999).

News from the school or sheriff's office was slow to develop. News outlets made assumptions and went to air with the most reliable information they had. When the seriousness of the situation began to come out, phone lines were jammed and panic became widespread as parents desperately attempted to learn the fate of their children.

When the Jefferson County Sheriff's SWAT team finally breached the high school, the two killers had already shot themselves. It would be a few hours before the SWAT team made it safely to the library where 10 of their victims had fallen in just under 8 minutes. It would take another few hours before the fallen would be identified. In some cases, the press made announcements as to who the victims were before the parents and family members were notified (CNN, 1999).

Over the next couple weeks, national media would descend onto the small town of Littleton, Colorado which would lead to a public backlash directed at the press from local residents, which included vandalizing a local news van and heckling the reporters (Shepard, 1999).

The lack of communication and release of incorrect information from officials during and immediately after the massacre caused panic and concern. Whether or not a better communication plan could have saved some lives is left to speculation. In addition to the potential to alert authorities more quickly, a practiced and well drawn out crisis management plan could have created better evacuation routes and better-prepared students and teachers for such an event. The communication channels and information presented to the media and the public was lacking accuracy and promptness, causing widespread panic as well as clogging much needed resources. Had the school and sheriff's office been more prepared, parents and students could have had a much better and clearer direction and method to reach loved ones.

The events of Columbine on April 20, 1999 highly illustrate the need for organizations to have a crisis plan in place. It shows the importance of clear communication channels and the consequences of being ill prepared to communicate clearly and concisely with the public.

Research Design

To first understand the Columbine tragedy in the context of crisis communications, it must first be defined. In order to accomplish this, the shooting will be analyzed and broken down using Crisis Typology. As explained by Maresh (2013), in order to prepare and act effectively and efficiently in a crisis, one must first identify and categorize the crisis they are facing.

The first typology describes the amount of warning the organization has before the actual crisis occurs. Developed by Bernstein (2011) warning-based typology broke a crisis down into the categories of creeping, slow burn or sudden crisis. Creeping crises give warnings but in unrecognizable patterns that don't allow management and officials to clearly see the looming crisis. Slow-burn crises provide some detail of warning before the actual risks occurs. Sudden crises occur without warning.

Analyzing the Columbine Massacre will focus on which of these three types of typologies best describes the tragedy which will allow a better examination of the pre-crisis chapters of the events of April 20, 1999. It will look at the warning signs, if any, and determine if any kind of planning and preparation of such signs could have prevented or lessened the tragedy in any way. Once the tragedy's warning signs are assessed, it can be more easily determined if Jefferson County authorities and officials took appropriate or inappropriate steps.

W. Timothy Coombs (1999) offered another typology of a crisis, characteristic-based. This categorization of crises is best at assisting crisis management teams in predicting and preparing for potential crises. These categories break down as natural disasters, megadamage, workplace violence, rumors, challenges, technical breakdowns, human breakdowns and finally organizational misdeeds. Determining the characteristic-based typology of the Columbine tragedy can help management crisis teams develop a more accurate and successful Strategic Communication Action Plan.

At the heart of dealing with a crisis are the actions an organization takes during that crisis. The best course of action is the one that has been prepared and planned. Through this method, an organization can be prepared by knowing what does and doesn't work and avoiding those obstacles and actions that cause problems while allowing a more fluid communication

network by utilizing those methods known and proven to work. Maresh (2013) broke down the aspects of a Strategic Communication Action Plan. She described the best way to deal with a crisis is to be prepared for it. In order to be prepared for it, an organization needs to plan for it. The steps best suited to assist with planning for a crisis are to first establish a crisis team then for a crisis management team to train a spokesperson, select a media center location, hold crisis drills and prepare a crisis combination log and contact list. After taking these steps, a crisis management team can then concentrate on prevention and response procedures.

This paper will look deeply into whether or not the officials in Jefferson County, Colorado had a Strategic Communication Action Plan and how they may have used the varying steps of such a plan in order to better handle the crisis. If there was no action plan in place before the tragedy occurred, this paper will look at what steps officials did take and how they might fall into certain areas of the Strategic Communication Action Plan.

Once the crisis has begun, an organization must know how it is going to respond to such a crisis. In addition to having described the aspects of the action plan, Maresh (2013) detailed the characteristics of effectively responding to the crisis. Timeliness is the first characteristic. When responding to a crisis, is the response occurring quickly and in a satisfactory time frame? Other characteristics include honesty, consistency, empathy, and interactivity. Whether or not the response is honest should be the focus of a management team. The message should not only have the continuity of previous responses but should also maintain the ideals and principals set forth by the organization prior to the crisis occurring. The response should take into consideration the emotions, feelings and suffering of those involved and affected by the crisis. Finally, the response should have a fair amount of interactivity, which allows the public and those involved in the crisis a way to communicate back and forth with the organization.

The response of Jefferson County officials will be analyzed and examined in order to see if their response was appropriate or whether it fell short and was inappropriate by looking at these characteristics. Lacking any of these characteristics in such a crisis can lead to bitter and harsh feelings toward the organization that could make further communication even more difficult.

Finally, when making the response, it should be decided which channel to deliver that response (Maresh, 2013). It is recommended that the message be delivered in the same channel that the crisis broke. In the case of Columbine, the first word of the shootings occurred only minutes after it began through local television news stations. Jefferson County focused all of their responses during the crucial hours of the crisis directly to television news media through press conferences. In this way, officials were able to deliver their responses via the same channel that news of the crisis broke.

This paper will look at the different strategies that focus on crisis communication and will examine the actions taken by both the Jefferson County School District and the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office and compare and contrast the actions they took with the recommended and suggested course of action in these ideas and concepts. After matching up the actions Jefferson County officials took with the concepts relating to crisis communication, a clearer picture of where officials went wrong or where officials took the correct actions will begin to develop.

In examining and analyzing the actions of officials in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999 and the post-crisis weeks and months that followed, it should be discovered whether or not Jefferson County officials effectively and efficiently communicated with the public during the Columbine tragedy, where officials made the right decisions or the wrong ones, and what could

have been done differently. By answering these questions, future crisis management teams can be better prepared for when a tragedy like this occurs again.

Analysis

On April 20, 1999, Marilyn Saltzman, the manager of communication services for Jefferson County Public Schools in Golden, had just returned from the annual “Good News Breakfast” in which the school district celebrated public service achievements within the community. At some time around 11:30 a.m., she received a phone call from a television station requesting information regarding the shooting occurring on the Columbine High School campus in Littleton, Colorado (Stateman, 2000). This was the first she had heard about the incident.

When she arrived on the scene a little over an hour later, she was informed that since the incident was a crime scene, the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department would be in charge of all communication with the press. The sheriff’s public information officer, Steve Davis, would take the lead. Over the next few days, he would be sure to hold press briefings every hour while Saltzman stuck to his side. If there were any questions regarding the school, she would be there to answer them. Sheriff John Stone would be the face in front of the cameras. His first announcement would be that 25 people were killed (Denver Post, 2000). It was this number that caught the attention of not only local, but national and international journalists.

The school district and the sheriff’s department were the two main organizations, essentially making up the Jefferson County official response team. Saltzman, who was possibly the most prepared for the attack, having been involved in a crisis training program only one day prior to the Columbine tragedy taking place, took the back seat to the sheriff’s department and the sheriff himself. Sheriff John Stone, who would later be asked to resign by several members

of the community for his missteps in his handling of the media, would become the face of the tragedy, hosting most of the press conferences and making the official statements.

Throughout the first day and night, and weeks following the attack, both the school district and sheriff's office made several decisions. Some were the right choices and some were the wrong ones. The first step in identifying the nature of these is defining the typology of the Columbine Massacre.

Hindsight is 20/20. Looking back at the warning signs of Columbine may lead people to say that officials should have seen this coming. One of the Columbine killers had built a violent website and was caught by his father making pipe bombs (Stateman, 2000). A few days before the attack, during the school's prom, posters with the date of the prom were scratched out and "4/20...it's coming" was scrawled in its place (CNN, 2000). Even a death threat by one of the shooters toward another student was allegedly made and reported (Lessons, 2000). While looking back at the devastation that occurred it is easy to say people should have taken notice, but in context, it could be easy to see how these could have been misconstrued or written off, especially in a pre-Columbine world. Nevertheless, parents of both the victims and the shooters brought lawsuits against the school district and the sheriff's department. A District Court later dismissed all but one against the sheriff's department. In a statement after the lawsuits were dismissed, the school district responded, "The district is pleased with the ruling, but there is no victory in regard to this tragedy. Our hearts go out to the families affected by this tragedy" (CNN, 2001).

To some, the crisis didn't truly begin until the killers walked onto the school grounds and began firing. School shootings were making the news prior to Columbine, but none drew as much media attention. Shootings like the one in Paducah were causing some schools to start

looking at the possibility that this could happen to them. Several schools were already installing metal detectors and creating zero tolerance programs regarding any kind of weapon in school, not just firearms (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). With school shootings not being unheard of along with the warning signs surrounding and created by the killers themselves, the Columbine tragedy could be considered a creeping crisis.

On one hand, Columbine was ill prepared for the events of that April day. A lack of preparation that was reflected in the words of teachers, reporters and even President Bill Clinton, all asking how could it happen in a place like Littleton (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). The confusion that occurred in the first hours of the Columbine tragedy was a lack of that preparation. At the time, the school district did have an emergency response plan. The high school had even gone through training a week prior. However it wasn't until the actual shootings took place that weaknesses of that plan were found (Stateman, 2000).

With school shootings in the past and other warning signs including a death threat made by one of the students, whether taken seriously or not, should have at least made school officials aware that they could possibly be in a creeping crisis. If the possibility had been realized and accepted, officials could have began making better plans and preparing for the possibility of such an attack occurring at Columbine High School. Events such as these should have placed a school shooting on a risk assessment. No articles could be found stating whether or not Jefferson County officials ever conducted a risk assessment and if they had, whether or not school shootings made the list.

Making a proper risk assessment, or at the very least acknowledging the possibility of a school shooting, could have prepared the school district and inspired them to develop a plan. In developing a crisis plan, characteristic-based typologies assist greatly by giving several possible

scenarios and allow the organization to plan for any number of them. While an employee did not commit the violence, the shootings should still be considered that of workplace violence. The definition of workplace violence as defined by Maresh (2013) includes that of *employees* committing violence on the grounds of the organization, but considering the relationship between students and teachers and staff, the relationships between them could easily be similar enough to be considered the same.

Marilyn Saltzman expressed that there was an emergency services plan intact, but it wasn't until after the shootings occurred that the holes in the plan were discovered. While this plan may have been several steps in the right direction, it was not a complete Strategic Communication Action Plan. If they had completed and followed through on such a plan, those holes could have been discovered earlier, perhaps in time to avoid some of the panic and fear caused that day.

The Jefferson County School District efficiently and effectively had established a communication team prior to the tragedy. The team consisted of Saltzman, Barbara Monseu, area administrator, and Rick Kaufman, executive director of communication. As soon as word broke of shots fired on the Columbine campus, Kaufman and Monseu rushed to the school in order to be on site during the incident. After assessing the scene, Kaufman requested that Saltzman, a veteran of PR and the media, join them at the school. Her experience as a reporter for the Denver Post and her seventeen years of public relations experience made Saltzman a perfect choice for a spokesperson (Stateman, 2000).

The management team had already chosen the Jefferson Public Library as a command center, but later moved to an administration building once the crisis began to calm down. They were prepared with phone and computer banks and twenty employees to man those stations.

At this point, the communication team seems to have been well prepared. In fact, the school district even had emergency training for the school a week prior to the shooting. Though this training wasn't a fully representative drill. The district was unprepared with no contact list or calling procedures for such an incident. Students wandered around campus aimlessly after escaping. Some simply ran off to their favorite hangouts. Most students tried to call their parents or family members, which led to phone lines being jammed and creating more chaos (CNN, 2000).

At one point, the news media told students and parents to call the wrong number to alert officials that they were safe or to find out if their child had escaped. This caused Jefferson County emergency team's phone lines to crash and interfered with emergency response efforts. Had a hotline or designated number already been established and handed out to media in case of such an event, which could have included severe weather or fires damaging the school, this confusion and chaos could have been avoided.

Despite these mistakes made in activating and following through on a proper Strategic Communication Action Plan, the Jefferson County School District communication department seemed up to the challenge of dealing with media. However, once Saltzman arrived on the scene, she learned that the sheriff's office would be dealing with the media. In just a few minutes, Sheriff John Stone would make his first statement to the press. Saltzman and the rest of her communication team would have to take a back seat and watch from there on out.

Maresh (2013) recommended utilizing the same media channel to make an initial response as was used to break the crisis. In the case of Columbine, that media channel was that of the local television news outlets. At 11:47, a little over 20 minutes after the first shots were fired; Denver station KMGH reported the incident taking place. Less than an hour later,

Jefferson County School District had set up a hotline for parents to call and had alerted the news media (Denver Post, 2000). A couple hours later, Sheriff John Stone went in front of the cameras.

In responding to any crisis, the response should be timely, honest, consistent, feel for the victims and those affected, and interactive. The timeliness of a response can be subjective. In a situation like Columbine, the public, parents and students in particular, want answers immediately. When those answers are not known for certain, only the answers that are known facts should be presented (Maresh, 2013).

Coming more than four hours after the shootings began, Sheriff John Stone stepped before cameras and declared that as many as 25 people were killed in the massacre, a number that exceeded the true number by ten (Denver Post, 2000). This was an inaccurate number and is considered one possible reason for such a media frenzy to be launched on the small town of Littleton, Colorado (Shepard, 1999).

The information presented in the very first press release was wrong. It was known to be an estimate and was presented as a highly accurate number. This was the first of many communications delivered to the press that would eventually lead to the public demanding the resignation of Sheriff John Stone. The lack of timeliness in the response and the lack of honesty within the first statement set the tone for the way the public would view the handling of the press for the Columbine Tragedy.

Parents waited to hear word of whether or not their children were safe. Even those who hadn't heard from their child held out hope. Police began contacting parents one by one, once they had names of the victims. By the morning of April 21, 1999, all of the parents had been

notified as to the fate of their children. The number of dead dropped from 25 to 13 and the two killers.

Shortly before noon the day after the shooting, Sheriff John Stone went before the cameras again, and announced that he personally believed that there were more people involved in the attack on Columbine. Less than two months later, after viewing and enhancing the video surveillance footage of the high school, the FBI would conclude that the two killers acted alone (Denver Post, 2000).

Stone was also highly criticized for distributing the cafeteria surveillance footage to other police agencies. One of these tapes was intercepted by an Albuquerque news affiliate and fed the footage to CBS. He also allowed reporters from TIME magazine to watch the killer's video diaries before the families of the victims (Lessons, 2000). Much later in the year, Stone would break another rule of providing an appropriate response. He agreed to pose for photographs in his SWAT uniform while holding the weapons used by the killers in the shooting (Stateman, 2000). These acts showed a complete lack of empathy and consideration for the victims and their families. The photographs with the killer's weapons is often considered to be the breaking point in his career as sheriff and in February of 2000; over eighty percent of his constituents wanted him out of office (Lessons, 2000).

In a time of smart phones and social media, it is hard to image how there was so much confusion and so many parents wondering if their children were safe or not. In April of 1999, several students and teachers made calls from their cellphones, but lines were still not fully digital. The analog lines caused lines to jam and drop calls. Announcements of which students and teachers had made it out were limited to lists posted on a cafeteria wall. After families were reunited, it became simply a case of waiting for police to make a statement. There was little to

no interactivity between students and their families, and the officials that were investigating the horrible tragedy.

As the high school campus was still considered a crime scene, Saltzman and her communication team were limited to releasing the information they were provided and permitted to by the sheriff's office. As they received the details from the sheriff's office, they would release the information through announcements directly to parents in meeting areas, or to the media for release.

As police released the campus, Saltzman and her team were able to regain some of the media control. They continued to be along side the police public information officer every step of the way. The Jefferson County School District communication department met every morning at 2am to discuss the events of the day and to unify on the same message. Staff members watched as much news coverage of the tragedy as possible in order for them to be prepared for what questions might be asked and what topics were in the forefront of the media's attention (Stateman, 2000).

Even a year after the tragedy took place, Saltzman and her staff were still receiving phone calls every day regarding the tragedy. Saltzman's team would find "trigger dates," that could interest media so that they could be prepared if news outlets decide to cover anniversary dates or other events involving the high school (Stateman, 2000).

The crisis of April 20, 1999 will continue to be a part of the communication team of the Jefferson County school district and will possibly never move out of post-crisis status. Jefferson County School District as well as school districts around the country have learned from the events that took place that April day in Littleton. Those lessons learned could not only help save lives, but could help prevent tragedies like Columbine from ever happening in the first place.

Discussion

Two separate entities, the Jefferson County Sheriff Office and the Jefferson County School District were thrown together that fateful day in April of 1999. Had these two organizations united previously, before the Columbine shootings, then personnel may have become more familiar with one another and they might have been able to communicate and develop those lines of communication before they were needed. While the shootings made the campus a crime scene that placed the sheriff's department in the lead, it became apparent that the school district was more prepared and more skilled in public outreach and crisis planning and communication.

A Strategic Communication Action Plan, and the adherence and following of that plan, could have better prepared all teams involved in the crisis response. While some of the steps of the action plan had been design and followed, others had not. Communication teams were established, and command locations were quickly established, but other issues, like a lack of a contact list, insufficient training of a spokesperson, and the lack of running drills caused for issues and problems to occur which could have been avoided.

A well-trained spokesperson could have known the important parts of presenting a response, those key components such as honesty and empathy. Sheriff John Stone presented few if any of these characteristics in his public statements. Stone showed a lack of empathy and consistency throughout the crisis itself and the year long post-crisis that followed.

The very first statement made by the sheriff's office showed a lack of concern for accuracy. Rushing to the podium to announce the death of 25 individuals, which was known to be merely an estimate at the time, was an inappropriate action and drew even more attention to the crisis (Shepard, 1999). The sheriff's department should have waited until an accurate number

was discovered. The following day, the sheriff made another statement in which he suggested that more people were involved in the shooting. Whether or not this was a possibility, the phrasing and potential ‘manhunt’ the sheriff was insinuating was highly inaccurate and eventually proven to not be the case.

The disastrous leadership and bad media decisions made by Sheriff John Stone were not accurate or timely and were not considerate of the feelings and emotions of the families involved. Stone, therefore, made a terrible spokesperson for the tragedy. Stone should have received more training or instruction as to how to present himself. His policies and procedures led to the public eventually crying out to have him removed from office (Lessons, 2000).

In the first few hours of the shootings, there was little to no contact with the media from the sheriff’s department. The little detail that was given to the media was from the school district in regards to a hotline that was established for students and parents to call for information on who was and wasn’t accounted for. This came after the media had given out the wrong number. When planning for an event, a hotline should already be established. If it isn’t handed out to the media in advance, it should be one of the first bits of information presented to media outlets. Had the hotline been given out earlier, then emergency phone lines may not have been tied up and jammed. One of the steps in an emergency crisis plan is to create a contact list. Had these contact numbers been determined and presented prior to the crisis, confusion and chaos might have been avoided.

Additional issues regarding the telephone lines could have been discovered prior to the shootings. Saltzman and her Jefferson County School District communication team had an emergency plan in place prior to April 20, 1999; however, it was never tested. The school district never ran a drill, which is one of the aspects of a Strategic Communication Action Plan.

Saltzman admits that there were lessons that could have been learned by running drills, lessons that were learned through the shootings (Stateman, 2000).

Drills could have shown how the phone lines were not designed to handle the amount of calls they received that day. The overwhelming air traffic caused most cellphones to have no signal. The analog lines couldn't handle the overwhelming amount of calls throughout that part of Denver. These phone issues could have been resolved prior to the shooting, had proper drills been run to test their emergency responses. Even if the shooting never occurred, the school would still be prepared in a situation like severe weather or fire.

At the time of the Columbine Massacre, social media had not become as predominant as it is today. Technology was still developing. With today's technology, communication between parents and students, as well as school and sheriff officials with the media, would be simplified and more accurate. The establishment of a Twitter hashtag or Facebook page could help students alert parents and friends as to their safety. The notification as to what was occurring on campus could spread quickly through text messages and even evacuation plans or directions for escape could be emailed or posted to accessible websites.

During the assault on the school, someone in the building pulled the fire alarm. When the fire alarms went off, it caused a deafening screeching. This caused phone calls coming from within the building to be difficult to understand. Even people sitting next to each other had a difficult time hearing one another. During the shooting, it was discovered that these alarms could not be turned off externally. Had drills been run, this oversight might have been realized and an alternate method of turning off the fire alarms from outside the building, may have been found and initiated.

Despite the lack of planning and execution of a fully developed Strategic Communication Action plan, the communication team of the Jefferson County school district made several correct steps prior to and during the crisis and post-crisis. The first step is to have a communication and emergency team in place. Saltzman and her team were well established, had professional experience and were familiar with one another. They had received training and were even making sure that the schools themselves received training. While they had not developed relationships with the sheriff's department as well as they might have, which could have been established through drills, they were still an experienced enough team that they were sure to respond immediately to the crisis by assembling the team, establishing a base of operations close to the campus and prepare responses as quickly as possible. Due to the nature of the crisis, they were unable to respond in as timely manner as they would have chosen to, due to the sheriff taking over the communication efforts.

The school district communication team remained on site and continued to monitor all news media in order to stay informed and prepared. They also had nightly meetings throughout the post-crisis in order to stay on the same page and ensure that they were all sending out the same key message and there was no inconsistency in their messages.

A year after the crisis, the communication team was still showing empathy to families, even when those families sued the school district. When a judge threw out the lawsuits, the school district still showed courtesy and empathy toward the family by saying that there were no victors in this tragedy and then extended their heartfelt emotions to the families of the victims.

To make a claim as to whether or not the communication teams were successful or not would be a difficult task, particularly due to the split between the school district and the sheriff's office. The mistakes made by the sheriff's office greatly damaged the reputation of those

involved in managing the crisis. So overall, the mistakes that were made created rifts, communication gaps and negative feelings among the parties involved. The Jefferson County school district team, however, while not fully prepared, was well prepared and followed a large majority of the recommended steps of a Strategic Communication Action plan.

With such a stark contrast between the efforts made by the school district's communication team and the fumbling of the sheriff's office, the question arises what a communication team should do when the chain of command is hindering proper and recommended safety and communication plans. Potential future research could delve into procedures for a more experienced communication team to regain control of a crisis when a higher level organization is beginning to cause problems or make the crisis worse, especially when those bad choices place lives at risk.

There was much to be learned from the Columbine massacre, and many school districts around the nation did implement emergency plans. Some of these plans and changes were made due to severe pressure from federal agencies. These agencies withheld funds from school districts unless these emergency plans were developed and implemented (Birkland & Mawrence, 2009).

Mistakes were made. Not every crisis can or will be handled perfectly. The majority of what was learned from Columbine was perhaps by the school itself. It learned the weaknesses and fallacies in their policies and procedures and even their technical abilities and infrastructure. Should another crisis occur at Columbine, they would be more prepared to handle it. This is one lesson everyone can take away from the tragedy. When an organization actually goes through a crisis, they can learn the chinks in their armor, the flaws in their policies. Drills that simulate all

aspects of a crisis or tragedy can help spot those problem areas and allow an organization time to repair them before an actual crisis occurs.

Conclusion

If Columbine has taught the crisis management field anything, it is that preparation is key. Perhaps the most difficult task in preparing for a future crisis is accepting that it can happen at one's own organization. Accepting that a crisis can happen at one's organization is also the most important aspect of crisis communication. Until an organization realizes that any and all types of crises can happen to them, then they are left vulnerable and unprepared for the events that will follow all stages from pre-crisis to post-crisis. By preparing for a crisis, an organization can possibly even avoid one.

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Crisis Chronology

Pre-Crisis

December of 1998

Robyn Anderson purchases three of four guns for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Mark Manes sell Klebold and Harris the TEC-9 used in the shootings.

April 17, 1999

During the Columbine prom, the dates on several prom posters writes “April 20 - It’s coming” over the actual April 17th date.

April 20, 1999

11:10am: Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris arrive on campus of Columbine High School. Before entering the high school, Harris tells one student to lead because he likes him and doesn’t want him to get hurt. Between 11:14am and 11:17am, Klebold and Harris plant two duffel bags containing 20 pounds of explosives in the cafeteria and then leave then return outside. At 11:17am, harris and Klebold activate bombs in their own cars with timers. At 11:19am a diversionary bomb is set off 3 miles from the high school in an effort to divert emergency personnel away from the school.

Crisis

April 20, 1999

11:19am-11:22am: Klebold and Harris are perched on a high point outside the school. One of the students says, “Go! Go!” and pull shotguns. The first shots kill Rachel Scott and injure Richard Castaldo while they were eating lunch. Daniel Rohrbough, Sean Graves and Lance Kirkland are all hit by gunfire and drop. Five more students are hit while sitting on the grass. Kelbold returns to Danil Rohrbough and kills him at close range. Both suspects light and throw pipe bombs onto the roof of the school. At 11:22am the first 911 call comes in reporting a girl injured in the school’s parking lot.

Shortly after 11:20, the KUSA newsroom begins to receive phone calls inquiring about shots fired on the Columbine campus.

Inside the cafeteria at 11:24am, teacher William Sanders and custodians tell students to get down. Teacher Patricia Nielson notices two students outside with guns and assumes it is a home movie and approaches to tell them to stop but one of them fires into the door. Nielson and student Brian Anderson flee into the school library. Deputy Gardner arrives and Eric Harris opens fire on him. Deputy Gardner returns fire. He think Harris is hit when he spins, but Harris begins to return fire. Harris enters the school. Students in the cafeteria begin to flee.

At 11:25 Nielson calls 9-1-1 from the library. Jefferson Country Sheriff’s Office announces possible shots fired at Columbine High School. At 11:26 two more deputies, Scott Taborsky and Paul Smoker arrive and exchange gunfire with Harris who fires through a window before disappearing back inside the school. As Klebold and Harris walk through the halls firing their

semi-automatic weapons. Student Stephanie Munson is hit in the ankle while trying to flee with other students but is able to make it out of the school. Teacher Dave Sanders sees one of the gunmen approaching and flees but is hit. Another teacher pulls him to safety inside a classroom and two students administer first aid.

11:27: Deputy Gardner issues a “Code 33: Officer needs emergency assistance.” Klebold and Harris are outside the library, randomly firing their weapons and throwing pipe bombs. Inside the library Patti Nielson is on the phone with 9-1-1 and tells students to get under the tables. At 11:29 Harris and Klebold enter the library. Of the 56 people in the library, Klebold and Harris kill 10 and wound 12 in under 8 minutes.

At 11:30 the Manager of Communication Services for Jefferson County Public Schools, Marilyn Saltzman, receives a phone call from local media asking information about the shooting on campus. Saltzman is unaware of the incident.

At 11:32 the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office receives the first call from media requesting information about the activity taking place at the high school. At 11:33 SWAT is dispatched. At 11:35 the shooters kill their last victim in the library before moving to the front counter. At 11:36 more pipe bombs are thrown into the cafeteria while SWAT commander Manwaring establishes a command post.

At 11:44 Klebold and Harris return to the cafeteria. Harris attempts to detonate the propane bombs by firing at them, which fails to ignite. A student hiding in the cafeteria hears one of the shooters say, “Today the world’s going to come to an end. Today’s the day we die.” Two minutes later the gunmen exit the cafeteria as an explosive detonates and starts a small fire.

At 11:47 Denver’s KMGH announces the gunshots at Columbine High School. At 11:49 SWAT arrives on scene. At 11:52 Undersheriff John Dunaway authorizes SWAT to make a full breach into the high school. At 11:56 as Klebold and Harris return to the cafeteria, news outlets begin making the official statement that two gunmen have entered Columbine High School.

At 11:55am JUSA pulls regular programming and begins uninterrupted coverage of the shootings.

12:00pm: Officers request a news helicopter to fly over the school in order for the command post to assess the situation. All major news outlets in Denver begin uninterrupted coverage of the event. At 12:03 a news reporter interviews the mother of one of the students who witnessed the gunmen. The news media learns through the police dispatch that the school is being evacuated. At 12:05 as medics are trying to rescue three injured students, gunfire erupts from the library. Deputies Gardner and Walker return fire. The television helicopter begins broadcasting images of the scene. At 12:06, SWAT enters the building.

12:08: Klebold and Harris kill themselves.

12:15 and 12:45: an unemployed snow border from Utah calls KUSA and pretends to be a student at Columbine. His deception is learned months later.

12:28: News media and Jefferson County School District announce a hotline for parents of Columbine students. By 12:41 most of the students are out and are calling 9-1-1, parents and television stations. The news outlets request students who have made it out of the school to call the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office or 9-1-1 causing the phone lines to be tied up. The message is quickly reversed to the parent hotline after sheriff's officials correct the media.

At 12:40, Marilyn Saltzman arrives on scene. She is told the crisis is under police control so she takes a back seat to Jefferson County Sheriff's communication department.

At 1:44pm, three younger males calling themselves "Splatter Punks" are arrested as they match the description of the shooters. These images are captured and aired on local media channels.

At 3:22 SWAT enters the library and requests paramedics.

Post-Crisis

April 21, 1999

National media has arrived in Littleton, Colorado. families of the victims began receiving inquiries from national media outlets and programs including Oprah, requesting interviews. Jefferson County school superintendent Jane Hammond closes all of the schools in the district.

April 29, 1999

The last funeral for victims of the massacre is held.

Two weeks later

A KUSA news van is vandalized and Columbine students heckle news reporters and tell them to "Go the f--- home."

May 22, 1999

Seniors of Columbine High School graduate.

May 28, 1999

The autopsy reports of the 13 victims are sealed by District Judge Henry Nieto.

June 1, 1999

Students are allowed to return to the school in order to collect their belongings left behind on the day of the attack.

June 3, 1999

Repair work on the high school begins.

June 15, 1999

Parents make public their desire for the school library to remain closed.

June 16, 1999

Jefferson County Sheriff announces that footage of the massacre has been enhanced and reviewed by the FBI and that there is no reason or evidence that there was a third gunman.

July 20, 1999

Students and the families and victims of Columbine high School return to the high school to paint memorial tiles that are to be adorned to the school's hallways.

August 16, 1999

Columbine high School reopens and students return to classes for the new school year.

September 1, 1999

After several death threats, Jefferson County school officials enhance security and send letters to parents of the high school.

October 4, 1999

Families of Kelly Fleming and Daniel Rohrbough file lawsuits after their tiles, including religious themes are not allowed to adorn the walls of the high school.

October 12, 1999

Leaked surveillance footage from the cafeteria at the time of the massacre airs on CBS. The footage was not intended to be released to the public but was obtained by a local Albuquerque news affiliate.

October 17, 1999

20 families announce that they are preparing to sue the school district and the sheriff's department because of the shooting.

December 13, 1999

TIME publishes select moments of one of the shooters three hours of video diaries. Backlash ensues due to the parents of the victims not being shown the tapes before the media.

January 12, 2000

A restraining order prevents Jefferson County Sheriff from releasing further video tapes of the killer's video diaries.