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Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

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Public Relations and the “Yuck” Factor

A Case Study

Art Botterell’s Fourth Law of Emergency Management tells us that “Perception is Reality.”

Sometimes we find ourselves doing things not because they are absolutely necessary but because we wish to allay public concern. This was certainly the case in Y2K where public concern far exceeded our assessments of the risk to public safety.

I experienced the same thing during the electric power crisis in California in 2000-2001. Based on our analysis of the problem, the rotating power outages posed little threat to public safety. We knew where and when they would occur and how long they would last. However, public concern was high so we needed to do a lot of outreach and have a very visible response mechanism.

Allaying public concern is an important aspect in our line of work. However, sometimes we can take it too far.

The Problem

At 1:30 on June 15th, a security camera at the Mount Tabor Reservoir captured the image of a young man

urinating in the reservoir. Security staff immediately shut down the flow of water.

The Mount Tabor reservoir is one of five open reservoirs that provide drinking water to the city of Portland. Water in the reservoir is already chlorinated. The reservoir was briefly disconnected in April 2010 because of a problem with *e. coli*. The Bureau tests water quality but does not drain the reservoir for dead animals.

The average human bladder holds 6 to 8 ounces of urine. Urine is essentially sterile.

These are the basic facts behind the incident. Assume that you are the administrator of the Water Bureau and that you believe this may be a potential public relations crisis. How would you deal with this problem?

Options

Let’s consider the potential options available to you.

- *Do nothing.* There is an old saying that, “to take no action is itself an action.” You can take the position that 6-8 ounces of sterile urine in

8 million gallons of water does not pose a threat to public safety and elect to take no action.

- *Prepare a contingency plan.* You can opt to do nothing but develop a media strategy in case the incident becomes public. Part of your strategy could include a credible authority, such as the Public Health Director, as your principal spokesperson. You could also include precautionary actions such as the shutting down of the system and testing water quality.
- *Implement your media strategy.* If you believe word is going to get out, you can get ahead of it by implementing your contingency strategy. Keep it simple and factual – this has occurred, it poses no risks, here are the precautions we are taking.

The Response

The Portland Water Bureau opted to drain 8 million gallons from the reservoir at a cost of \$32,700, principally in lost revenue. The reservoir was offline for a week. The administrator of the Water Bureau justified his decision by asking, “Do you want to drink pee?... I guess I’m responding in part to the yuck factor”

The Lesson

Was the decision by the Portland Water Bureau an over-reaction? It would certainly seem so from the point of view that it did not relieve but actually increased public concern over the vulnerability of open reservoirs. The statements by officials certainly did nothing to put the incident in perspective. The City Commissioner who oversees the water bureau was quoted as saying, “I think I’m going to have a coke with my lunch today.”

We are also seeing the same tired stories suggesting that terrorists could contaminate our water supply by accessing open reservoirs. Like the Portland Water Bureau, many of these stories ignore the effect of dilution – it would take a considerable amount of toxin to contaminate millions of gallons of water.

There is a very real risk to open reservoirs but not from urine or terrorist attack. In 1993 in Milwaukee thousands of people were sickened and as many as 100 died after being infected by cryptosporidium, a parasite found in the feces of infected humans and animals. The US Environmental Protection Agency initiated a program in 2006 to eliminate uncovered reservoirs. In June the Portland City Council approved an \$80 million contractor for a new reservoir that would eventually replace Mount Tabor.

This raises one last disturbing thought. Was this a manufactured crisis? The incident occurred the night before the administrator of the Water Bureau appeared before the City Council to review a \$23.2 million contract for security and deferred maintenance at Portland's open-air reservoirs. The administrator described the incident, overestimating the cost to drain the reservoir. Some news articles are suggesting that this was a staged event to garner support for construction contracts.

Manufactured crisis or over-reaction? Either way the reputation of the Water Department and, by extension, that of the City of Portland has taken a hit. This is why it is so critical to identify a potential crisis early and to formulate a pro-active media strategy. Your reputation is irrevocably tied to your message – it must be honest and credible. 