

**PBPA Podcast Transcript**  
**Crisis Preparation and Management for Nonprofits**  
**(29:04 minutes)**



Sireesha ([00:00](#)):

The old saying goes, all publicity is good publicity. Hmm. Meh. We beg to differ. Nonprofit organizations rely on their goodwill to raise funds and continue to do the good work that they do in the community. And bad publicity related to a crisis at your nonprofit could have the potential to destroy such goodwill. Join me today in a conversation with Chuck Toney as we explore real life case studies and discuss practical insight into developing effective crisis management strategies. In a world where uncertainties are the only certainty, understanding how to anticipate respond and recover from crises is not just a skill, but a legal and PR necessity for any nonprofit organization.

Sireesha ([00:55](#)):

Hello and welcome to the PBPA Podcast. In each episode of the PBPA Podcast, we explore legal questions relevant to Georgia nonprofits. I'm your host Sireesha Ghanta, Counsel and Education Director at the Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta. PBPA strengthens our community by engaging volunteer attorneys to provide nonprofits with free business legal services. We provide numerous free resources via our website, including articles and webcasts specific to Georgia nonprofits and their business legal concerns. We also provide direct legal services to our clients. For more information on client eligibility requirements, to apply to be a client or to access our vast learning center, visit our website at [pbpatl.org](http://pbpatl.org). Before we jump into this episode's topic, keep in mind that this podcast is general information, not legal counsel, contact your attorney for guidance on your nonprofits' specific situation.

Sireesha ([02:04](#)):

Chuck Toney is a seasoned communications specialist with C Toney Communications, where he specializes in crisis management, strategic communication planning, and media training among a variety of other specialties. He has over 30 years of experience in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. And we are thrilled to have such a knowledgeable expert to speak with us today about crisis management. Thank you so much for joining us today, Chuck.

Chuck ([02:36](#)):

Thank you, Sireesha. I'm glad to be here to talk about something nobody wants to talk about, but everybody thinks about. So.

Sireesha ([02:43](#)):

That's so true because Chuck, a few weeks ago you came in and you sat with the attorneys at Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta to speak with us a little bit about crisis management in general. And it was after speaking with you that we decided we need to put a podcast together because this is such great information that you have to share that could benefit our nonprofits. And to start off with, you spoke about something that I thought initially was really straightforward, but then after going into it a little further, I realized, oh, it's not as straightforward as I realize. So what is a crisis?

Chuck ([03:24](#)):

Yeah, it does seem self-evident, but then it becomes hard to define. And I think it's a very helpful tool that I offer to what I do and to my and to my clients. Um, partly because you need to know what a crisis

is, because overreacting to something that's not a crisis can create as much problems as underreacting to something that is a crisis. So I have, I have three points and, and I'm a speech writer at heart, so I like alliteration. So they all begin with the letter D, so that's helpful to remember.

Chuck ([03:53](#)):

So first is a crisis, that's something, is something that disrupts the daily operation of any organization. And the immediate response I know is, well, I get disrupted every day, and that's true, but it's the first trigger to what is a crisis? It's something has happened that disrupts the daily operation and needs somebody's attention. Um, not all of them are crises and not all of 'em have to be handled by leadership, but that's the first. So something has disrupted your daily operation.

Chuck ([04:22](#)):

The second is a critically important one, is that it diverts the attention of leadership away from strategic and long-term goals. Um, I have a friend here in Athens who works with executive coaching and leadership training, and she says that leaders need to be working on their business, not in their business. And so leaders need to be dealing with strategic, and they need to be, have people in their support staff who are dealing with the day-to-day. So if a disruptive incident happens that diverts the attention of leadership down in, into the daily operation, we're probably talking about something that is, it is bordering on a crisis.

Chuck ([04:57](#)):

And the third "D" is that it develops concern, fear, anxiety, anger, um, all sorts of feelings, and also all sorts of chatter among staff supporters in the nonprofit world. And I'm a former executive director of the Food Bank of Northeast Georgia. Among your donors, among your volunteers, among your community, um, you probably need, need to think about how to respond to that. Um, so those three elements, not every crisis hits all three, but most crises hit all three. So is it disruptive to your daily operation? Does it divert your attention as a leader away from strategic and long-term goals? And does it develop fear and anxiety and concern that needs to be addressed among all of your constituents?

Sireesha ([05:40](#)):

Do you have any examples you would like to share, um, of situations that are a crisis or are not a crisis, just generally speaking?

Chuck ([05:51](#)):

Sure. I, uh, I, I have a lot. I'll give you three, uh, examples of crisis and then one that I think think is what I would call more issues management that doesn't really level rise to the level of crisis. Um, I serve, as an advisor to the CEO of a national Christian bookstore that went into bankruptcy. Um, and the interesting thing about that is, I was thinking about it in preparation for this conversation, is that that bankruptcy was not a sudden disruptive event. It certainly was seen coming, uh, over a period of months or maybe even years, but it did become disruptive. Um, it certainly diverted the attention of leadership. Um, and in a faith-based organization that has some pretty strong, um, tenants and principles about financial management, declaring bankruptcy certainly created that sort of fear and anxiety and chatter. So that was one that met all three of those criteria. And, and we, uh, we did our best, uh, to help them through that.

Chuck ([06:48](#)):

Um, another client of mine was a, a system of national biomedical, uh, research laboratories around the country. One of those laboratories has, um, a colony of baboons, uh, several hundred baboons as part of their, uh, uh, part of their testing procedure. Um, and four of those baboons managed to escape one day. Um, and so we had a, a disruptive event <laugh>, it certainly diverted the attention from the leadership. And when you get social media postings of, uh, rush hour traffic baboons running alongside people in their cars and they're posting video and saying, what in the world is going on? We certainly have that level of chatter.

Chuck ([07:25](#)):

And the third one was a, uh, very, um, uh, very high quality, um, uh, private K through 12 school on the east coast that had a racially tinged social media post made by a sophomore student. Um, and, uh, the, the English major nerd, and he always reminds us that sophomore is Greek for wise fool. Um, so sophist sophisticated moron, right? That is literally what that word means. And so it was unintentional and not malicious, but once it was posted and became shared out into the community, it met all three criteria. It was disruptive, it diverted the attention of leadership, and it certainly developed into that level of chatter. So all three of those rose to the level of crisis where it needed a coordinated, intentional values-based response.

Chuck ([08:13](#)):

Um, the one I'll share that is more felt like a crisis because everything feels like a crisis when it's happening to you. And I understand that was the CEO president, CEO of a local financial management organization who every year at Christmas, um, hosted for their, um, their clients and their families, um, uh, a family movie night. They rented out one of the theaters here in town, and they paid for everybody's tickets and all the concessions. And it was, it was just a wonderful event to show gratitude and thanks and celebrate the holiday season. Um, and so they worked with the theater, uh, uh, two years ago, um, and, and picked a movie, and it was a Disney movie, and it sounded good. But, um, one of their clients called and said he had read on a conservative blog or website that there were some issues that were addressed in that movie that were concerning to him based on his faith practices. Um, and he was probably not gonna come to the movie, and he wanted to know what she was gonna do about that. And so she called me and, and a, a good bit of what I do in crisis counseling is therapy, which is sort of talking people down a little bit. And I said, okay, um, you have, you have a client management concern there. Um, I don't need it. I don't think needs a widespread response. I think you've done what you, you've talked to the person. Um, so I would call that issues management. Um, it involves her a little bit. It wasn't really disruptive, um, and it didn't create a lot of conversation. It really was just that one client who called. And so, um, they did begin to, going forward, the implement and prognosis, do a little more screening and a little more research about, about movies. But, um, you know, if she had over responded to that and sent an email to everybody, she would've created a whole lot more questions than just talking one-on-one with that one client and addressing his concerns.

Sireesha ([10:07](#)):

Those are great examples to kind of highlight what is a crisis that meets the, that definition with the three Ds versus what is not necessarily a crisis, but just needs a different level of management. So now that we know what is a crisis, what should a nonprofit do, is there anything a nonprofit can do, before the crisis happens to better prepare themselves for when the crisis does happen?

Chuck ([10:35](#)):

Yes. My my preferred way of working with clients is to do crisis preparation. I'm happy and here to do crisis response, but, um, so I would offer a few things. The first thing is to use that definition, uh, to think about what, what could go wrong in your organization that rises to that level, apply the three D's to it. Um, I often ask people in this situation, what, what? Keep, what keeps you up at night? And everybody has an answer to that question. And it, and it usually is four or five things that keep people up at night. I know when I was at the food bank, it was, um, food contamination. It was some sort of discriminatory act by one of our partner agencies. It was, um, an accident with one of our trucks. I could easily, um, come up with that list so everybody knows what could go wrong.

Chuck ([11:23](#)):

So apply that definition, and, and think about what really would, would rise to the level of those three Ds to disrupt, divert, and develop. Um, then the next step is to think about what you would say, what sort of statement you would make. And in my business, we call it a "holding statement". And that literally means it holds your place in the conversation. And there's a pretty straightforward template for, for creating that statement. And, um, unfortunately it's not alliterative, but it's "E-S-A". So it's emotion, status, action. And one of the things I've observed about organizations, and particularly larger organizations, when they find themselves in a crisis situation, they tend to forget about the relationship with their clients and their constituencies. And so it's important in a crisis situation to react humanly, we have an emotional response to this, this thing has happened. Let's use the social media incident with the, with the, with the student at the, at the K through 12 school. Um, something like, um, uh, uh, we're disappointed that a student has taken, taken an action that does not express our values. Um, and we understand how, how people are reacting to that. Something like that, that expresses our re uh, an emotional reaction, a human response to what has happened. The next thing is status. What do we know? And this is, this is an important one because, um, I often say that in a crisis situation, first information is worst information. And if you think about crisis situations, disaster situations that you've heard about on the news or read about, how often do the details change in the first 24 hours. So it's very important to get, be as certain as you can about the information you're going to share.

Chuck ([13:20](#)):

So, emotion, we are heartbroken, we're disappointed, we're angry. Um, whatever that statement is status, here's what we know. Again, we'll use the social media incident. We know that a student posted on unfortunate, um, troubling, um, image to social media. Um, and we are addressing that internally. And then action. What are we gonna do next? This is sort of the, we will continue to investigate. We will continue to gather information, and we will take appropriate action once we have all the facts, um, in place. So emotion, um, have a human response to what has happened. 'cause that's a relationship. I often tell people that, um, if you look at the Latin Root of communicate, communion community, it all goes back to essentially what means with us or sharing. This is about how we have relationships with other people and how we respond in both good times and bad times. So what is the emotional response? What are you as an organization feeling and expressing? What do you know and what are you going to do? What's the next step?

Chuck ([14:27](#)):

The other thing you can do is think about who you need to communicate with in crisis. And you can prepare that distribution list. Um, for nonprofits, you're gonna need to communicate with your board leadership, and then your board fully. You're gonna probably need to communicate with your staff. You're probably gonna need to communicate with volunteers, and you're probably gonna need to communicate with key donors. So those are sort of the internal family, um, constituencies that you need

to communicate with. And then there's a, we'll talk a little bit about the external media, newspapers, tv. Um, but that holding statement is, is the perfect thing to give. When, if media should ask about what had happened, if it rises to that level, um, where there's been, an abuse allegation, a discrimination allegation, an injury or a death, any of those very serious things that might rise to the level of generating external media interest, um, as well as social media interest. You have that statement in hand.

Chuck ([15:24](#)):

Um, and the wonderful thing about doing this in preparation is that you're doing it when, when you've had a good night's sleep and your heart's not going 187 beats a minute, right? It's not good. Um, I, you know, I, I don't like to talk about the pandemic. I'm glad we're coming out of it, but the pandemic gave every one of us on the face of this planet a common crisis experience. And if you think about in a leadership position, how hard it was to make decisions on March 13th, 2020, because the information was contradictory, it was changing. So if you can take a step back from that and spend the time looking at this definition and thinking about what you would say and what you would do when you're calm, when you can think clearly, you'll be much better prepared to, to respond when it does happen.

Sireesha ([16:13](#)):

Those are great tips when you're, when you're in a calm situation, do your pre-planning, drafting that holding statement, and creating that distribution list of stakeholders, um, before anything happens. And I also wanna mention that depending on the nature of the crisis, the organization should keep their existing policies in mind, uh, such as an employee handbook. If the nonprofit has a grievance policy or social media policy, or data breach policy. Um, just because an organization has a crisis does not mean that your existing policies, um, should be disregarded. The reason an organization creates these policies or guidelines, whether it be a grievance policy or kind of a crisis management holding statement, you create those ahead of time so that you're able to have consistent best practices to guide your organization through relevant situations. And so, Chuck, you mentioned the pre-planning, and if an organization has completed their pre-planning, they have their holding statements, they have their distribution lists, and then a crisis that kind of meets the requirements of those three Ds, um, happens. What should a nonprofit do in that situation, in response?

Chuck ([17:38](#)):

So once you've gathered the information and you're confident in the information you have, and if you've, you can't predict every possible crisis that could happen, but most of us know probably 80% of what would happen. So you've, you've probably done some, some preparation there. It, it's time to think about what to say and who we're gonna say it to. Um, and I think there's a, there can be a tendency to go immediately to the media. Um, I would, uh, we'll talk a little bit more about dealing with the media, but I, I would hold off on that. I, I think another mistake organizations make is they go external before they, they go internal. And, and your internal constituencies are really your most important people, that, that's your family, right? So your staff, your donors, your volunteers, your board members, they need to hear from you first, um, so that you get your message to them and your communication to them, um, before they hear it somewhere else. You, you don't want your board chair saying, I just heard on the radio that something terrible happened. Why didn't you tell me about it? Right? That's, that's not, that's not what you want to happen. You want honor that relationship and that communication.

Chuck ([18:49](#)):

Um, the other thing that's really important in response is to honor your values. Um, the, the good news about bad news is that people are paying attention and, uh, are you living the values that you had when everything was good and when something's gone wrong? Um, I had a, I had a client, um, that was a, a higher ed client who had a situation that involved a sexual harassment allegation, and then a Title IX lawsuit and a federal, federal courts. And, and they initially wrote a response that that was, was, was pretty defensive and was, with all due respect to my friends at Pro Bono Partnership, was, was pretty lawyerly. It was making a case. And, and I was not familiar with this, with this college. And I went to their website, and I'm kidding you not at the top of their website, it said, at blank College, um, um, we serve the whole student body, mind, and spirit. And I said to them, you, you had your message and you abandoned it when things went bad, why, why not honor and, and reflect and, and use that statement in your response to this, this particular incident and this student, um, who up to that, the point you had just, you had expressed a level of care and concern and love for. And so don't forget your values, be true to your values, live those values. Um you know, adversity doesn't build character. It reveals it. Um, so be true to what you are, when times are good, uh, when times are bad.

Chuck (20:23):

But yeah, you can definitely have, you can have, you could have done the work to determine what, what, what would rise to the level of crisis. You can have holding statements drafted. You can have those, um, those distribution lists ready to go. And you can also know who is the person who is talking to those people. Um, it's probably, if it rises to the level of crisis, it needs to be the top, the person at the top of the organizational chart. It needs to be the president or the CEO or the executive director.

Sireesha (20:54):

Okay. Those are great tips that, so when the crisis happens, I like how you mentioned the values of the organization. I think for nonprofits, that's really easy. You know, as a reminder in that situation, go look at your mission statement again. Yep. Um, and then making sure that you gather and confirm information. "First information is worse", that's a good line to remember.

Chuck (21:19):

Um, I, I've reminded myself, I've reminded myself many times in my life as a spokesman for, for organizations that I can always say more, I can never say less.

Sireesha (21:28):

Yes. That's so true. Right?

Chuck (21:30):

You, you can always add. So be confident in what you're saying, and if at some point in subsequent days or weeks you need to say something more, you can, but you can't get it back once it's said. So be

Sireesha (21:41):

Careful. And so that's kind of what the holding statement goes to too, right? This, that first statement. And then once you gather, get more, then you can do follow up as needed. Yeah. Um, but the lawyer in me still has to, to point out <laugh> that the response needs to be balanced with the legal obligations of the nonprofit. Um, if the crisis involves a potential abuse of a member of a vulnerable population, an organization should keep in mind mandatory reporting requirements and the confidentiality of all the parties involved. And this just came up yesterday actually, but if it involves an employee, keep privacy

laws in mind related to that employee. Um, yesterday I read a report in local media about an employer who took to social media. <laugh> It's everything bad here? An employer took to social media to vent about an employee, uh, who had been terminated. And I guess that terminated employee had been talking about it on social media. And so then the employer thought, okay, then I can do that too. And I can also put all this information out there on social media. But no, just because the employee has started to share some information does not mean that the employer can divulge any further information about, uh, about the employment.

Chuck ([23:07](#)):

And that speaks to an interesting phenomenon that, and I still started my life as a reporter, and I've dealt with reporters all my life. But I think it's, it speaks to an interesting phenomenon, which is in a situation that in some way pits an individual against an organization, media, and in some cases, general public sentiment defaults to the individual. And so I think as organizations, it's under, it's important to understand that reality, that we are sort of behind the eight ball, so to speak, automatically when there's an individual who is making an allegation under this accusation, a lot of sentiment and belief defaults to the individual. And so in that case that you just, that's what reminded me in that case you just described. Uh, I was just thinking, how can I make this crisis worse? Well, I can go as the leader of the organization, <laugh> and pile on the individual, and thereby magnifying that known phenomenon where the sympathy defaults to the individual. So

Sireesha ([24:13](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, I could see that. And well, you, you mentioned the media, you, that leads me to my last question. What should a nonprofit do if a member of the media, if a reporter contacts the organization and they want to interview someone at the nonprofit about the situation?

Chuck ([24:31](#)):

Yeah. This is one of, of the great things about the holding statement, because you can simply provide that holding statement. Now, they're always gonna want more. Mm-Hmm. Um, they're, they're all particularly tv. Uh, and you, and you know, for my colleagues, in that media market where you, in Atlanta, where you have multiple TV stations and competition and, and the sensationalism and, and all of that, they're always gonna want somebody on camera. But you have no obligation to do that. Um, if you have the skill and the experience to do it and be effective, um, that's a decision you have to make. And then as you mentioned, Sireesha, one of my services that I provide is media training. I can, I can help you with that, but there's really no, there's not much added value in that. If you've crafted and drafted and written the holding statement in the "emotion-status-action" template.

Chuck ([25:23](#)):

Um, we've all seen these stories on the news, right? Where they say, uh, they, nobody would go on camera, but they gave us this statement. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And even if they don't run the whole statement, if you've written it, and I've helped people write them, and I've written many of them, if you've written it in a way that you're comfortable with any part of it being excerpted, you're fine. Um, I also think, again, to reiterate, that's why the emotion part of it is so important. Um, if we go back to that idea that the organization versus the individual, expressing that human emotion being vulnerable in some ways, as long as it's, it's, it's legally safe to do so, is a very effective way to cut through some of that negative sentiment that attaches to the organization. So the holding statement provided to the media, they can use it in, in full or any part of it. Um, you know, if they come knocking on your door, um,

you can just simply say to them, you know, we're, we're, we're comfortable with the holding statement that we provided to you.

Sireesha ([26:28](#)):

But then also, as you mentioned earlier, that holding statement should have gone out first to your kind of internal stakeholders first before going out to media. Is that right?

Chuck ([26:40](#)):

Yes. And, and I would, my advice, um, with some level of, of about 90% certainty is that there's no reason to send a statement to, to the media until they ask. Um, you know, if they don't know what happened, you don't want to call their attention to it. So, um, you know, I would, uh, we can, pardon the pun, we can hold the holding statement, um, until the media asks for it. Um, I would be more concerned with communicating, uh, directly with those internal constituents, those family members as I call 'em, um, mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, so that, that they know what's happened. If they're asked in the community, particularly board members, um, or donors, if they're asked, they have at least that information to share. And, and it's generally just a matter of respect and, and how you treat, how you treat your internal, your family members.

Sireesha ([27:34](#)):

Yeah, definitely. This has all been such great insight, Chuck. I thank you so much for sharing your time and expertise with us. I know our, this will be very helpful to our nonprofit audience. Hopefully they won't need to use this. They'll be avoiding crises, but if and when it does arise, this will hopefully make it a lot smoother.

Chuck ([27:56](#)):

Yeah. Well, unfortunately, it's not if, it's when, for most of us, and, and there is a lot, I think there's some comfort now in knowing you can do some things ahead of time. You can use the definition, you can do some preparation, um, and be ready when it happens.

Sireesha ([28:12](#)):

That's an excellent point. It's not a matter of if, but when. All right. Thank you so much, Chuck. I appreciate you.

Chuck ([28:18](#)):

Thank you. I enjoyed it.

Sireesha ([28:22](#)):

We hope that you found this episode of the PBPA Podcast to be informative and helpful. We add new episodes every month with short conversations about general, yet important legal information for Georgia nonprofits. Remember that this is not legal counsel. Talk to your attorney about your organization's specific concerns. Thanks for tuning into the PBPA Podcast. And to all nonprofits listening out there, thank you for all the good work you continue to do in our community.