

# Navigating Through Crisis

## Part 4: Learn Lessons

by Ann Taylor

*In this fourth part of a five-part series on crisis management, Ann Taylor, recipient of the Public Relations Society of America's Gold Excalibur Award for Crisis Management, examines the five steps to successfully navigate through a crisis.*

### PLAN NOW FOR THE INEVITABLE

The common misconception about crisis—an unplanned event that radically raises scrutiny, and threatens organizational reputation—is that it occurs suddenly, without warning. Often, before erupting, crisis smolders while warnings go unheeded. Even events that seem wildly unpredictable did not occur without warning.

#### **This is the warning. The chance to prepare is now.**

Despite the inability to predict the exact features of a crisis, every crisis follows a pattern: from pre-crisis, to acute, to resolution and recovery. And every organization can prepare for, not just the unforeseen, but the unimaginable.

There are five steps to navigate through a crisis:

1. Protect trust
2. Accept responsibility
3. Repair damage
4. Learn lessons
5. Bounce forward (not back)

#### ABOUT ANN TAYLOR



Bringing more than 30 years of experience in innovation and leadership, Ann's career has focused on building brands, engaging audiences, and creating consumer preference in real estate and land use. Her newest venture, Wide Ranging + Co., provides brand, PR, and creative services to businesses in responsible land use and the built environment. Contact Ann at: [ann@widerangingco.com](mailto:ann@widerangingco.com)

#### ABOUT ELEVATE MARKETING ADVISORS

Elevate Marketing Advisors develops marketing and business development campaigns to invigorate your brand, differentiate your firm, and drive business to your bottom line so you stay focused on design and delivery of your discipline.

We are driven to help people and firms realize their beyond through relationship, advocacy, and an elevated client experience. We do this through a daily commitment to our guiding principles:

- Empower Disruption.
- Reach. Then Reach Higher.
- Make a Difference Every Day.
- Have Fun and Kick Ass!

## Step 4: Learn Lessons

The global crisis of COVID-19 taught us our vulnerabilities and tested our values. Although the pandemic has been unlike anything we have experienced in our lifetime, what is true of every crisis remained true with this one—crisis reveals character, your organization’s leadership capabilities, and commitment to your people. Those that paid lip service to core values, saying “we are like family,” showed how hollow those words were when they were inflexible and unyielding to employees’ and neighbors’ needs.

The advantages of preparation and alignment with deep core values have never been more obvious than over the past year. Together, these foundational elements (preparation, values-based leadership) empower people to get into action quickly and respond positively without losing critical time in anxious introspection.

No business burnished its reputation more during the pandemic than H-E-B, a Texas-based grocery chain that inspires near hero-worship among Texans. On March 20, 2020 Brené Brown, the world’s leading expert on courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy—all of which are companions of a crisis experience--retweeted an H-E-B post. Brown said, “Every time I think HEB can’t get better, it does. If you’re in Texas, it’s not your grocery store—it’s family.”

This is the H-E-B thread Brown retweeted:

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**“We are proud to announce that that all hourly store, manufacturing, warehouse and transportation Partners will receive \$2/hour Texas Proud Pay effective 3/16-4/12 to recognize their hard work and thank them for their commitment as they help serve our customers & communities. Texans rely on H-E-B and we rely on our great Partners. We understand it is our responsibility to provide essential services to our customers during a time when so many other businesses have not been able to stay open or have had to scale back operations significantly. H-E-B Partners come together during times of crisis to take care of each other and our customers. This is the Spirit of H-E-B.”**

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What is important about H-E-B’s response to the unimaginable global pandemic is that it wasn’t unimaginable for H-E-B. A secret of their heroic response was that H-E-B dusted off a playbook created 10 years earlier during a swine flu outbreak, when they prepared a pandemic scenario. And while the storyline trumpeted from Washington in February 2020 proclaiming COVID was stopped at the border, H-E-B leaders were holding tabletop simulations of a statewide outbreak.

H-E-B is headquartered in Texas, a state hardened by hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, and freezes. Team members had practice responding quickly to disasters. They built and shared institutional knowledge they then applied during the pandemic.

But not even H-E-B could foresee every scenario. It was surprised by the great toilet paper shortage of 2020.

Again, responding as they do, H-E-B’s president, Craig Boyan, identified as “Craig, H-E-B President” in the video caption and wearing his “Craig” nametag, posted a video viewed on Facebook more than half a million times explaining the shortage and what the company was doing about it. Perhaps more remarkably, he’s joined in the video by business unit director, Luisa, the frontline manager over paper products.

If a company is uncomfortable letting its president and a team member several rungs down the ladder, like Luisa, go on camera to put a human face on the organization and respond directly to a social media panic, that company lacks the leadership, preparation, and character of H-E-B.

Proving that H-E-B had learned lessons during previous disaster responses, Boyan ends with:

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**“Texans, we’ve all been through hurricanes and crises together. This crisis is larger, more uncertain and most likely longer than any of those. The reality is things are changing every day, and we all need to adapt accordingly.”**

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The “we’re in this together” message removes the us/them divide between faceless unfeeling companies and an angry public. Being willing to be human, imperfect, yet open and forthright in communications, and having earned public trust during previous disasters, lessons learned and applied have earned H-E-B an even more loyal fan base.

**Coming Next:**

**Navigating Through Trust Part V: Bounce Forward (Not back)**