



NATIONAL HIGH MAGNETIC FIELD LABORATORY

Operated by Florida State University, University of Florida, and Los Alamos National Laboratory

Florida State University, 1800 E. Paul Dirac Drive, Tallahassee, Florida 32310

Phone: (850) 644-0311 Web: www.magnet.fsu.edu

NHMFL Crisis Communications Media Training

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A. What is the purpose of crisis communications?

A “crisis,” in PR terms, isn’t always a crisis. Crisis Communications are responses to any situation that threatens the reputation of your organization. Crisis communication isn’t about spin: it’s about telling the truth as quickly and effectively as possible to the people who need to hear it- be it the media, funding sources, etc. The cliché way PR folks say this is: “Tell it all, tell it fast, and tell the truth.” Following this simple advice can help leaders disseminate info quickly and effectively.

For the Magnet Lab, a crisis can mean any of the following:

- A significant funding cut
- A criminal act involving lab personnel or property
- A public statement by a disgruntled former employee, student, or user
- An allegation of financial mismanagement or workplace harassment
- A serious accident or infrastructure malfunction
- A publicly reported disagreement with a funding source

B. The Crisis Communication Team

The crisis communications team is necessarily small, given the rapid response needed for events of the nature described above. Each member of this team needs to exchange cell phone numbers. (The Lab Director, Deputy Lab Director, and Public Affairs Director need to include relevant university and NSF contacts as well.)

- Director and/ or Deputy Director
- Human Resources Director
- Public Affairs Director
- Safety Director (when applicable)

If the crisis in question involves a specific group, the leader of the affected group joins the team. Note that this list does not include legal counsel. If, when evaluating a situation, you feel that the list *should* include legal counsel, that’s a good sign that the crisis is better suited to a coordinated response with Florida State University. However, *even when lawyers & funding sources* are involved, it’s important to remember that the Lab Director and Deputy Director make the final call on communications decisions- not legal counsel. Lawyers may know more about the law, but upper management almost always knows more about what’s best for an individual organization.

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C. Designating a spokesperson: Who speaks for the lab in a crisis?

As with an emergency response plan, in a crisis, it's better for just one or two people to do the talking. In the case of the MagLab, this one or two will almost always be the Director or Deputy Director, though in the case of a facility or safety event, this responsibility could extend to those positions.

In many situations, it may not be desirable for the lab to comment at all. Consider whether to defer questions, especially those about funding, to funding sources themselves. Choosing *not* to defer to these organizations often creates a brand-new problem.

D. But a reporter is on the phone right now.

It's always okay to tell a reporter that you'll call them back, even if it's ten minutes later. Saying you'll return the call gives you an opportunity to inform your supervisor or colleagues, to check your facts, and to decide whether to speak at all. If you choose not to speak, you still need to call back and refer the reporter to someone higher up or politely decline an interview. Before any conversation with media, but especially during a crisis, here are some questions to ask:

- Is the situation at the lab still unsafe? If so, any interaction can wait until the more important priority of ensuring the safety of lab personnel/ equipment is complete.
- Have I been cleared by my supervisor to speak with the media?
- Have the numbers I'm about to state been fact-checked?

If you need to decline an interview, don't say "no comment." This is universally perceived as a hostile response. Here are some more gracious ways to decline an interview:

- If the situation required the response of emergency personnel and law enforcement, note that you're still gathering details about the incident and thank the law/ emergency personnel involved.
- If the incident involves a criminal investigation, note while you can't speak to details, the lab is grateful for the investigation's thoroughness and committed to a fair resolution.
- If no one was harmed in a potentially dangerous accident, express gratitude for their safety and note that the lab is exploring the cause of the accident and ways to make the lab safer.
- If the crisis concerns or is about you personally, refer the reporter to your supervisor.

E. When MUST the lab respond to media?

1. When an employee is harmed or causes harm to someone in a way that attracts media attention, the lab must respond simply and quickly, expressing sorrow for those harmed. Failure to do so telegraphs callousness or culpability.

2. When extant media reports are incorrect in a way that's harmful to the lab. "To clarify, though Mr. X maintained an office at the Magnet Lab, his grant was overseen externally." *Never* expand gently distancing an event into blaming anyone else.

E. What if the lab has made a mistake?

Say so. This is one of the most important and most frequently violated rules of successful communication. Lying or omitting information about mistakes causes more lawsuits and negative press attention than admitting them. Be sure to couch the mistake in terms of what will be improved to avoid similar mistakes in the future. It's okay- and beneficial- to express regret, but speak about your corrective action (or intent to act) too.

F. What if an event has taken place AT the MagLab and media show up?

Unless the building has been evacuated, those media are entering public property during business hours and should be treated like any other visitor. The front desk should contact the Public Affairs Director, who will direct the media to a more appropriate time for an interview, set up an interview on the spot, or wait with members of the media as a situation unfolds as needed. Members of the media are not to be left unattended in the lobby. A representative from the local paper should be treated just as cordially as one from national media.

G. Can't I just speak freely with a journalist off the record and then make clear what can be reported?

This is not how the phrase "off the record" works. The rules of an interview must be worked out in advance of any conversation. Many lawsuits have been instigated over a journalist's interpretation of this phrase, and in almost all cases it's better to only say that which you won't mind seeing in the paper.