

The Small-Ball Elements of Crisis Management

BY JAMES DONNELLY

A baseball analogy is probably forgivable in a summer issue, so here's my pitch: The home run is over-rated.

There are many ways to score runs needed to win a baseball game.

Many teams apply a small-ball approach that relies on a sacrifice fly, a bases-loaded walk or an RBI single. Yet the home run makes the highlight reel. Baseball fans and sportswriters remember the home run — perhaps disproportionately in relation to a game's outcome.

From experience, I can tell you that crisis response work is like the home run of the overall crisis management game. (Disclaimer: Most of my home runs were in Wiffle ball and slow-pitch softball; my crisis response experience is all major-league.) Despite being just one element of the discipline, crisis responses get all of the attention. In fact, if you say the words "crisis management" to a large audience, then I suspect that most people would only think about crisis response work. Everyone loves epic tales of a reputation in peril and the crisis team who saved the day.

Perhaps it's time to give a dugout curtain-call to those other small-ball elements of crisis management that are equally important, if unheralded:

• **Mitigating risks** — Part of an active crisis management strategy helps ensure that problems and potential flash-points are addressed long before an actual crisis occurs. This element of crisis management receives little fanfare but is unquestionably important. Its absence leads to situations like the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, where risks were not adequately addressed in advance.

• **Maintaining alignment** — When companies reorganize, embrace new approaches or launch new products or

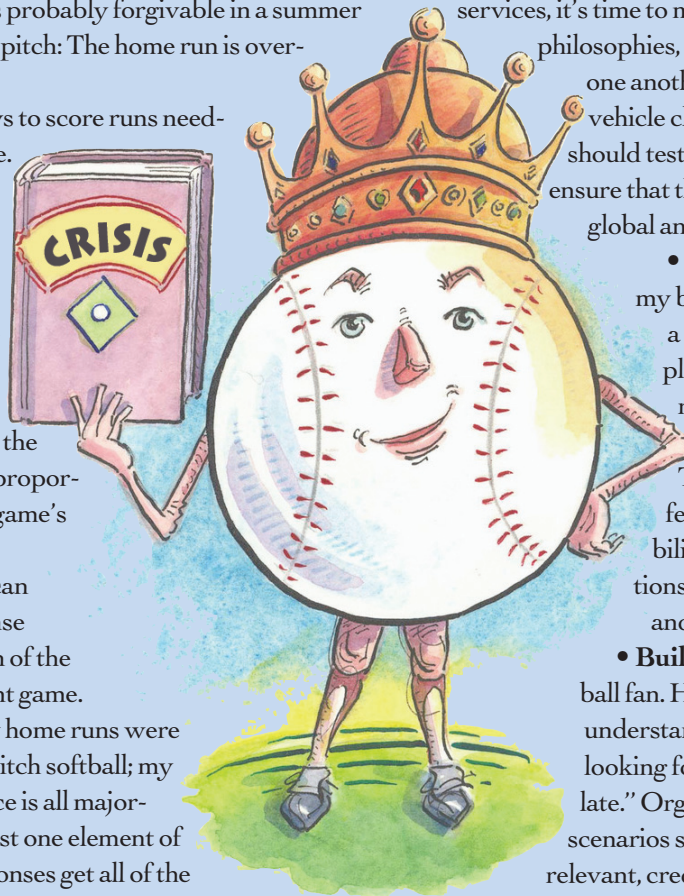
services, it's time to make sure that crisis management philosophies, goals and infrastructures complement one another. For example, when launching a new vehicle class in Japan, a U.S. auto manufacturer should test its ability to manage a crisis there to ensure that the organization is consistent with its global and local responses.

• **Training teams** — In a recent poll on my blog, 95 percent of respondents favored a well-trained team over a supercrisis plan. Yet in practice, that ratio is probably reversed in terms of how organizations conduct overall crisis preparedness.

Training is essential. I advocate three different levels to strengthen any crisis capability: tactical training (i.e., plan orientations, media training), strategic workshops and leadership programming.

• **Building allies** — Mark Twain was a baseball fan. His famous quip also illustrates a keen understanding of crisis management: "If you're looking for friends when you need them, it's too late." Organizations that plan against worst-case scenarios should find time to build a dialogue with relevant, credible third parties. These types of friends can provide much-needed support when bad things happen.

• **Integrating professional pessimism** — Crisis managers are paranoid by nature and typically become vindicated by experience. Organizations should embrace this behavior. Integrating a devil's advocate point-of-view into crisis programming in advance could help to prevent mea culpas when things take a bad turn later and the public demands to know why you didn't plan for this in the first place. ■



James Donnelly is senior vice president, crisis management, at Ketchum, with broad experience in issues/crisis management, crisis training, communications training, corporate public relations and global corporate communications. Check out www.jamesjdonnelly.com for ongoing dialogue and resources on crisis management and communications coaching. Follow him on Twitter: @jamesjdonnelly.