



HERE WE

REORGANIZING COMMUNICATION CHAINS AMONG STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

By Corie Schweser

Did you ever have one of those “Oh No, AH-HA” moments when you realized you thought you were sailing smoothly thru the planning stages of your event. You were rocking the communication highway when a pending weather event, AKA Mother Nature, decided she needed to test your stress level. Not only do you have hundreds of volunteers and vendors but thousands of guests that have to be told instantly that they needed to close up shop and evacuate your event. As in the past, we would have our standby radios, sending all types of copious messages to those committee people who were empowered to make decisions. Same things we have been doing for the last 40 years. Comfortable and confident Right?

Fortunately, everything turned out fine and Mother Nature zipped

around us like a kid on a skateboard. However we knew that the way we were communicating needed to change in order to stay current alongside our risk management protocols.

We asked a lot of questions from the staff, volunteers and the risk management team on how we can do a better job while keeping in mind the different scenarios we could be dealing with at any given time. We took into consideration the many ways you could communicate, the methods available to use, what is too much communication, was the message emergency or informational, the silos of communication, would the message be relayed to the volunteers clearly or would it become the campfire game, “Telephone”, changed and distorted.

What was decided upon was creating

a hierarchy chart that would force the silos of communication. We created themed silos that focused on the bevy of events that the festival hosts throughout the weekend such as: Sports, Royalty, PR and Social Media, Children Activities, Entertainment etc. each with a dedicated volunteer event chairman responsible for each silo. There is only one paid staff member, who answers to the Board of Directors, so that person was at the top decision making role. This top decision maker also was the point of contact for the risk management team that monitors the different levels of emergencies or threats. The second level of the themed silos would be managed by the individual volunteer themed chairman who are in a leadership role. In this role they would receive communication from the POC and disseminate it to their volunteer event committee members which would flow to the volunteers that support each event.

Once these hierarchy silos were defined, the committee decided to limit what is communicated thru these silos during festival hours, thus keeping the radio chatter to a minimum. The volunteer committee leadership mentioned that it was sometimes a problem with providing radios to volunteers because they want to use the radios all the time which creates a new challenge during emergency situations. We never want to discourage any volunteer from providing details of issues or problems however if the communication is flowing down the silos then it must flow up the same method. If the volunteer, working in conjunction with the event committee member, sees something such as an injury or potential risk, has a question or needs additional help, they will contact the Event Chairman for that specific event immediately. Most of the time, the event chairman can manage whatever the situation is or questions the volunteer may have. If the Event Chairman believes that it needs to be communicated to the second tier, Themed Event

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possible threat to the safety of the festival attendees, volunteers and staff. Once this Level One Emergency was determined the plan was to have all events shut down. All business conducted by our vendors would stop and they would be required to take shelter immediately. We would use a broader plan to disseminate this silos of communication and the Business Manager of the festival in partnership with the Emergency Response Team would send out a mass notification call by voice and text. This mass notification call would have the contact numbers of all our chairman and volunteers and could be sent and received in seconds. We would send out messages to our attendees by social media, website, and announcements by our PA systems. A precise message will be created to provide a sense of urgency and also keep calm and order while finding shelter. This precise message over the PA system will be repeated every two minutes until festival site is cleared for emergency personnel response. Our festival also provides free shuttle rides so contacting the bus drivers with festival attendees on board to seek shelter was also put into our mass notification plan.

We also wanted to make sure that there was a quick way for our volunteers to contact the emergency response team at the unified command center about potential issues or situations they have observed. We wanted them to feel safe and not threatened or uncomfortable. We created two specific codes for them to use over the radio, a code 44 and a code 22. These codes were in alignment with what the emergency response uses already among their team.

The code 44 was to be only used if they observed or suspected criminal activity or a situation they felt is a potential threat to the safety of the festival overall. They would have to maintain their position, if possible, stay calm and be ready to assist if necessary.

The code 22 would be used in case of an accident or injury. They would have to provide in a calm voice where they were in the festival grounds by providing the name of the nearest street or booth number. Report in a normal manner providing as much detail as possible the nature of the incident. These calls would be made over the main channel 1 on the radio everyone in a decision making capacity could here and respond accordingly.

Any time after these codes were used, the public safety personal would compile a statement from the volunteer with key points and distribute to staff.

The committee decided that we should put this new plan of communication to a

Chairman, it will be communicated to them and so on up the silo.

To keep the events and radio chatter streamlined, we assigned each event with its own channel with the knowledge that some events will only take an hour and some a few hours. The entertainment themed silos had their assigned channel for use the entire weekend due to their complexity and stage locations.

Each level of the silos had their responsibility levels defined and what they were empowered to do should a crisis or weather event occurred. We knew that training volunteers was just as important as creating these silos. In order for processes to work, clearly defined roles and training had to happen and be documented.

Our festival is currently celebrating its 40th year and has never done a full audit of its volunteer event management and experience. We had the mindset that if it wasn't broken and there were no issues bubbling to the surface, we were fine. We all know that in this day of social media we could not live by this thought anymore. Everyone quickly judging everything simply by someone's social media post, instead of the true facts. We updated our volunteer guidelines to incorporate our mission and vision statements.

Outlined the purpose of our festival which was created as a way for the Miami County non-profits to raise valuable revenue to support their programs. This also included how to handle event and festival finances, sponsorships or contributions. A section on how to handle communications and public relations including the media, along with this section came the insertion of the hierarchy silos of communication plan.

We would have monthly meetings with our Themed Event Chairman and the volunteer in charge of that event looking at how this communication silo would affect them and does it make sense. The meetings were attended as well by the emergency response team to help define the levels of emergency that could affect the festival. It was decided that there would be two levels of emergencies. Level Two Emergency was described as a situation where it was necessary to inform all staff and volunteers of a potential upcoming weather or other type situation that is cause for concern. The method of notification would be by radio and face to face communication. The themed silo chairman sending that communication to their appropriate event groups of responsibility. A Level One Emergency was described as a situation that is potentially very dangerous and a

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test to see if all of the months of planning will work out as we had hoped. We thought that since our festival occurs in the downtown area this would be a great place to run the test. Each volunteer would be designated an area of the city that pertains to a color code assigned by the Emergency response team. We ran scenarios for level one and level two emergencies and went into full practice mode alongside our volunteers. It ran as well as can be expected with some volunteers a little hesitant to say the specific details as needed to assist personnel. We thought we would also add a texting component should the volunteer be in a situation that by speaking over the radio could put them in a worse situation. They would text their event chairman the details of their situation and response would be immediate according to the situation.

Training of the volunteers also included a quick refresher on CPR and basic first aid. This helped them understand what questions the first responder may ask them and also save lives until help does arrive.

We found that at least starting with the basic breakdown of the hierarchy of communication to our volunteers and

chairman prevented unnecessary radio chatter and aligned safety measures with our risk management plan. The volunteers felt more confident about the assigned positions, that we as a festival cared about them and their safety. They felt they had the tools to do a great job for the festival, which as we know is an important component to retaining good volunteers.

Even though Mother Nature tested our stress levels by creating a perfect storm, it forced us to look over our own communication plans. We took for granted we had everything right, we were too complacent because nothing "bad" had happened thus far. The next time Mother Nature wants to come calling, we feel confident we can handle this storm, no matter if she skateboards around us or not.

Corie Schweser is the current Business Manager of the Troy Strawberry Festival. She started her career as a volunteer 15 years ago and is now in her 3 year as a festival manager. She is currently working toward her CFE certification.