

Intro ([00:02](#)):

You are listening to the Safety Moment Podcast by Utility Safety Partners. Safety is always a good conversation and it's a click away. Here's your host, Mike Sullivan.

Mike Sullivan ([00:15](#)):

Welcome to the Safety Moment podcast. Thanks for joining us. Tim, I really appreciate you joining me on the podcast today. And we're going to be talking about crisis communications, but before we even get into that, maybe just tell everybody a little bit about you, Tim Conrad, and how you got into this. I mean, what brought you into crisis communications? And I don't think you got up one day and said, I'm going to do this for a living, but how did you get there?

Tim Conrad ([00:43](#)):

Odd path, really. I actually did some of my first crisis work before I even knew what crisis communications was or public relations was. I was a volunteer quite a bit as a teenager and ended up on a couple of boards, and one of them had a crisis where one of our volunteers was taking money from the organization. Oh,

Mike Sullivan ([01:09](#)):

Okay, that'd be bad.

Tim Conrad ([01:10](#)):

We had to go and it was, it was quite significant amount of money and it caused long-term damage for sure. And so as a board, we had to go through that process and tell our people about it that were in the organization and then go through the recovery of that. And so I played quite a lead role in that. I guess I kind of fell into it with my mentor Alice Bent. She would get me into things like that, that she could see things in me that I couldn't see. So she isn't

Mike Sullivan ([01:48](#)):

That off in the

Tim Conrad ([01:49](#)):

Way. Helped me with that. Yeah, right. And then that happened again, I was in student government and this is really kind of got into the public relations side. And even still at that point, I knew what public relations was, but didn't know what crisis communications was. And I was doing it in student government. Same thing happened, got asked to come in because money was stolen and had to go through the same thing again. And then through that process, it's kind of funny, that's how I got involved in student government and the school had asked me to go in and fix it. They knew the story of my background. And through the student government, I realized I liked public relations and ended up eventually getting into, I was in electronics engineering at the time. Okay. Yeah,

Mike Sullivan ([02:36](#)):

Deviation.

Tim Conrad ([02:38](#)):

Yeah. And then ended up dropping out and switching over to business and going into public relations a few years later. So

Mike Sullivan ([02:46](#)):

What does crisis communications entail? I think generally people realize something happens and the public needs to know they need to be made aware or they need to be told what to do. But there's more to it than that. I mean, there's far more to crisis communications than that. So really what does it entail?

Tim Conrad ([03:08](#)):

Yeah, I see. I kind of chop it up into four pieces now. So there's issues, there's crisis, there's emergencies and disasters. But in our planning world, we kind of do crisis communications and it covers a lot of that, at least the issues in crisis. I'm pushing that we should be including emergencies and disasters in our crisis, communications planning now. But crisis communications is a blanket term to cover a lot of things, and those things can be such death on a work site, financial misdeeds, as I mentioned, someone in your organization doing something that's wrong ethically or service loss. And it's about being, ultimately you want to be prepared and be able to respond quickly and get information out to people and get the organization through that.

Mike Sullivan ([04:07](#)):

One of the things I noticed, and we're going to talk a little bit more about the natural disasters, that type thing. One of the things I've noticed, and I'm not sure I know it's not just me. I mean my wife and I talk about it, my friends or family, it seems that everything today is a crisis. Everything was, we're all boiling to death. There's going to be a flood that's never just a couple of millimeters of rain. It's 450 millimeters of rain, which is four centimeters, whatever. Everything is blown to the highest factor to get attention, but I think it's numbing us. So when the real disaster comes, it's just another one of those we're one or being blown out of proportion. Is that something that concerns people like yourself today that are trying to get the message out and help people?

Tim Conrad ([04:58](#)):

Yeah, I'll pick on the politicians here a little bit.

Mike Sullivan ([05:02](#)):

We all do. They're join the club.

Tim Conrad ([05:05](#)):

I want to slap some of them silly right now because I don't think they see the damage that they're doing and constantly being in this cycle of chaos and creating

Mike Sullivan ([05:17](#)):

On all sides, really

Tim Conrad ([05:19](#)):

It is.

Mike Sullivan ([05:20](#)):

Going to, no, it's not just one

Tim Conrad ([05:21](#)):

I'd love to get 'em all in a group and just stand there, get in a circle and I'm going to put my hand up and spin around in a circle.

Mike Sullivan ([05:28](#)):

Exactly.

Tim Conrad ([05:29](#)):

Yeah. And it's driving me absolutely crazy. And so it has really made things a lot worse from the political standpoint. Prior to that, the media was the 24 hour news cycle when that came along. That's where it fed a lot. Yes, we still have a 24 hour news cycle, but it's very different now.

Mike Sullivan ([05:55](#)):

Oh, it's in your hand 24 7 every second of the day.

Tim Conrad ([05:59](#)):

Yeah. I'm always amazed. It's like, is it really breaking news? How many breaking news banners do we need? Exactly. And so it's a real struggle. It's a lot that's blown up to be bigger than what it should be. And that's tough when you get into the really big moments when you really do need people to pay attention.

Mike Sullivan ([06:23](#)):

I agree. I think it's a danger to getting people informed, right? Because we're a little bit numb to, oh, it's not a real disaster, and actually no, this one is you need to leave or you got 30 minutes to get out of your house, whatever. It's this one is it. So I am a little fearful of that, and that has to be impacting people like yourself who are trying their damndest to get the word out. So I can appreciate that. I wanted to ask that question. One of the things that really just came to mind immediately when we started talking about having you on the podcast, now you've dealt with all kinds of things. I mean, you mentioned a few of them here, but really in the context of natural disasters, and I think you were involved in the BC wildfires the last year particularly, what kind of challenges did you face? I mean, there's people that they don't want to leave their home. I mean, regardless. And you can see, you can smell, you can feel the fires coming, no, I'm not leaving. I mean, how do you deal with that? I mean, this is real life stuff.

Tim Conrad ([07:27](#)):

Yeah. When we do evacuations, we're doing them to get people out of the way of danger. But sometimes it's because we know we can't maintain the services and the access that is needed to maintain the health and safety of the community. And so I've heard the comment sometimes I'm not leaving again because my host didn't burn down the last time. And I've heard that a lot actually. And it's kind of shocking to me, and I really counter that obviously. But we have a lot of things that are developing. And so one of the things we've always had people stay behind, but the difference is the type of people that are staying behind now is changing. So particularly in British Columbia, ranchers would stay behind. And they actually, decades ago, a big part of the helping to put out wildfires, the

Mike Sullivan ([08:28](#)):

Response.

Tim Conrad ([08:29](#)):

Sure, yeah. That's kind of changed over the years, and I know the government is looking at that again and exploring that involving them more, but they are a useful tool. They have equipment knowledge and so on that can be used. And I personally think it's important to explore that and see where we can do that. What we're also having is people staying behind that think that they can do the same thing with a garden

Mike Sullivan ([08:57](#)):

Hose or something.

Tim Conrad ([08:57](#)):

They might have a pump or they go that day and buy a pump hose and a tank or something like that. And it's like you don't know what fire is like and what it's doing and how it's changed. And that's my biggest thing. And even with the ranchers, I said to the rancher a bunch of years ago, I said, you don't get to choose which rank of fire comes over that ridge when it comes. So if it's a rank three, I have confidence that you can handle that or anything below a rank three. So those are the lighter, less burning, not intense fire, not extreme, but once you go to four or five or six, there's nothing human that can stop them. We've not created anything human that can stop them. And so don't think that you, and you've got your Honda pump and what a pond of water that you're going to be able to not only stop it, but survive even.

([09:55](#)):

And people get very angry when we ask for dental records, but it's actually true because honestly, that's all that's left of you. Once that fire goes through, it leaves nothing behind. And so that's where I'm quite scared with how some people that are not acknowledging the difference in the fires that we're seeing, especially over the last 20 years, but increasingly over these last, it started 10 years ago in Canada that they became way more extreme. And we've seen videos of it. We've seen Fort McMurray, you don't survive that. No, as a human, you can't get through that.

Mike Sullivan ([10:36](#)):

No. The images of people leaving Fort Mac in a vehicle or even on a motorcycle was just incredibly intense. It was a horrible thing. One of the things I wonder about is the population has just continues to increase. I saw an article yesterday that by 2050, the city of Calgary, which is now about 1.5, 1.6 million people, they're estimating will be 10 million people living in Calgary. I watch, it just blows my mind. So almost 10 times the number of people today. But I mean it's a natural progression of things. Now is it 10 million? Well, maybe not, but is it five that that's the population of the entire province right now? However, you see people, they got to live somewhere. So they're living further and further out. They are going into rural areas and they're building homes in the forests and have the emergency services kept pace with that because the more people that go into those natural settings that are in areas of increased danger, really, I mean if you have more homes in the natural areas, it's tougher and tougher to get services out there and to protect people. Is that having an impact as well?

Tim Conrad ([12:00](#)):

Yeah, I think so. I don't think that our services are necessarily keeping up because when you get into rural areas of this country, we rely on volunteers and especially with fire departments and search and rescue, and they're struggling right now. We've seen lots of that. And I am a former firefighter, so I know. And that's an area that we aren't acknowledging that needs more work and more people. And so when you move into the community like that, you need to participate and be part of that in some way. And the other side is I did a large wildfire and flood preparedness project the last year in bc, and there are people moving into these regions from large cities that have been living an urban life. And this was a sort of pandemic symptom that they decided to live a different life.

Mike Sullivan ([13:00](#)):

A lot of

Tim Conrad ([13:00](#)):

That bought a spot in the country and not aware of the surroundings, the danger that they have around them, how to get out, how to do things to protect themselves, whereas people that have lived there for some time have that knowledge and so that it's not transferring well and have heard that concern from people that have been living in those communities for a long time, that they're like, we're a little worried that these people that have moved in, they really don't understand what it's like here and how quickly fire can develop and move or flood for that matter. But most of the time in BC it is fire.

Mike Sullivan ([13:38](#)):

Well, people fall in love with the idea of it. And just because you can doesn't necessarily mean you should go out and live in the wilderness. You've got to be ready for it. You really do.

Tim Conrad ([13:48](#)):

Yeah, you have to be self-sustaining. The one thing, when you get into rural and remote areas of this country, you need to be self-sustaining. So what does that look like? How can I survive for at least 72 hours by myself with just what I have and possibly longer? We're looking at longer periods now, so it's like you can get cut off. And so you need to be really well prepared for lots of different situations.

Mike Sullivan ([14:13](#)):

And right now we're sort of talking about more of the rural areas and living in the mountains or something like that in the deep woods. But emergencies can happen anywhere. They don't have to be just in the back woods area. It can happen anywhere. I mean, roughly 11 years ago when we had the floods here in Calgary, I live, my home is about 600 meters from the Bow River and the Bow River. It's not a massive water body. Sometimes you can even walk across it quite easily. But when we had the floods back in June of 2013, that little river turned into a raging river. And even people on my street, I was told, if we come back by emergency services, and they said, if I come back, you've got 30 minutes to leave. And here we are in not downtown Calgary, I'm on the outskirts in the suburbs. But that it can happen anywhere. A fire can happen anywhere. And even today, brand new communities, the homes are so close together or they're attached and I don't know, sure, they sell the building codes, it's fine. I don't know if you've got that much heat, you're going to have fire that transfers over to the next property. And that has to be a challenge as well for emergency responders. And so again, we're not just talking about the rural areas, we're talking about

Tim Conrad ([15:43](#)):

Everywhere. Obviously in an urban setting, there's not as much a threat from wildfire. No flood is always there. As you mentioned in Calgary, I responded to the High River floods below Calgary and yeah, just incredible stories of how this wave of water came at them and just,

Mike Sullivan ([15:58](#)):

Yep, friend of mine lost his

Tim Conrad ([16:00](#)):

Down there, instantly filled that town. It was crazy. But as a former firefighter and having seen this firsthand, it's more common today that when you have a call for a structure fire and it's a host in an urban environment, that it's not a structure fire. It's structures on fire by the time you get there. So in the subdivision I lived in when I was living in Alberta, the fire department was a very quick response, got there very quickly, but by the time they got there, there were six homes on fire. So they had a massive situation on their hands immediately. And then also with the apartment buildings and condo units, same thing. We're building with wood and multiple story. And if they get going, it's all the things that are in our hosts, they burn at a higher temperature and they

Mike Sullivan ([16:58](#)):

Feed the fire.

Tim Conrad ([16:59](#)):

We can see these buildings taken out. So there was one I believe in Edmonton a number of years ago that was destroyed very quickly one night. And it never happens when you wish it, and it was the middle of winter, so they had water issues and that's pretty normal. And then one other thing that's always on my mind is hazard hazardous materials. We've got trains and we've got trucks and all sorts of things, transcripts,

Mike Sullivan ([17:22](#)):

Those kinds of nasties on those,

Tim Conrad ([17:26](#)):

Those materials are fine unless something happens. Weird and weird stuff happens. And even small amounts of things can cause massive evacuations and massive impacts. So we got to keep an eye on all of those things and be aware of them and always be prepared for that as communities and the governments that ultimately lead those

Mike Sullivan ([17:52](#)):

Efforts. Yeah, I mean you remember lack of GaN, obviously that was a major catastrophe. And we see every day there are oil by rail pipelines that go from Alberta to Vancouver and vice versa, or sorry, Edmonton to Vancouver transporting hydrocarbons. And nobody seems to really talk about it that much, but that is the way things are right now. Until those more expansion of the existing pipeline network, the and pipelines, transmission pipelines as fearful as some people or the media makes them out to be, they're the safest mode of transportation for hydrocarbons. It's the only method of transportation where the product is moving but the system isn't. And you have a train, you have a truck,

whatever, you got a lot of moving parts on that and a lot of integrity issues, whether it's track or road or whatever it might be, the actual containment that can go wrong.

(18:52):

And we saw Lac-Mégantic, and then someday we'll have nuclear or we will have something else. But until that day comes, we're going to have these pipelines on rail that are creating that massive amount of risk. And we get into risk communications and getting more to the heart of what we're talking about today. But when are you communicating? I mean are you, obviously you're out communicating to the emergency responders in advance and communities in advance of a situation. Did you find that, are people complacent? Are they listening or are they more interested today than they used to be because they see what's happening, the potential of what could happen?

Tim Conrad (19:40):

I think there's a great need for information and good strong communications when we have incidents. And I think some of the issue is that because we have larger distrust in our institutions these days for lots of different reasons, when we get to an emergency that is now coming over into the emergencies. And so it does make it difficult to get that information out and for people to trust it and trust that you are doing the right thing to help them. It's an area that we are going to need to spend more time getting people prepared and doing advance education of being ready for different situations and understanding what risks are in some communities. And so I'm really a big supporter of making sure that we have individual responsibility to be prepared to be

Mike Sullivan (20:55):

Ready. And obviously you're following the ICS, right? The incident command system, and you're probably well versed in ICS. Obviously you run those situations when emergency happens, the crisis communications kicks off the crisis communication center, the emergency operations center, EOC gets underway. What is your role? How are you working with everybody?

Tim Conrad (21:21):

Yeah, so what I'll fill is the role of public information officer and the information unit. So that is a lead role in the management team in the OC that reports to the director. And so you'll have other units like logistics, operations, finance, so on. And as information role, our job is to gather information and disseminate information. And so it's an ongoing process at all times, and we're doing it with every possible method that makes sense at the time and getting that information out to the community. So that's a really big struggle today because there's so many different ways to get information out and there's so many ways to collect it. So

Mike Sullivan (22:08):

Never in the history of mankind have we had so much information on our fingertips and we don't know what to trust.

Tim Conrad (22:15):

It's a really interesting time. And so what I'm seeing from the public though is we've always had a fight or flight, quite honestly. Most people just jump between those two. But now I'm seeing deny show up a lot and then fight. That fight is getting a little bit stronger. And so it's a real struggle I have to say these days with getting that information and having people trust. So I'm spending more time doing face-to-

face where I can get out in the community and listening to people and then also giving them information. Well, if you can

Mike Sullivan ([22:58](#)):

Become that trusted person in an interaction with people face-to-face in person, then if they begin to follow you, whether social media or wise, they know you're that trusted resource.

Tim Conrad ([23:10](#)):

Yeah, exactly. And it, it's really interesting when you go into the community, I had this happen last summer, and you go out and I will be on the media speaking and on YouTube and so on. So I'm a one dimensional character, and I get out there and people are like, oh, you're real. I actually hear that comment a lot. And it's like, yeah, yeah, you're a real guy. And when I'm on those situations where I'm speaking to me, I'm more structured. I would say you have to be. But when I'm having a conversation with people, I'm more relaxed and I'm generally concerned about people. That's one thing I want to know how they're doing. The

Mike Sullivan ([23:53](#)):

Empathy comes out

Tim Conrad ([23:54](#)):

and where they're at. And so it's interesting. It catches a lot of people off guard and it takes 'em a moment to adjust to it.

Mike Sullivan ([24:03](#)):

Well, that's not easy to do when you have a job to do. It's very serious. And empathy takes some time and you have to be genuine. And if you're not coming across as genuine, then you're probably not going to be trusted. So it's not for everybody.

Tim Conrad ([24:21](#)):

No, it is not. And that's a definite struggle. You can't be too polished on camera. That's one thing. And you have to make sure that you're being as human as possible when you're doing that. But the problem is, is that of course in the media world, they're just looking for a quote, a snippet. And then same thing on YouTube, just attention span. We have the attention span of a goldfish, which is like eight seconds long. And it's actually true, even in an emergency. The average time that people will watch a video is 38 seconds. And this is information to protect their life and to protect their home and their community and can't get them to go beyond 38 seconds.

Mike Sullivan ([25:00](#)):

And we're bombarded with so much information that 38 seconds today will be 28 seconds in two years or something. It just keeps going down. We're making ourselves numb like we were talking about earlier. And in this day of social media, I look back to one of my previous lives, I worked with transmission pipelines, regulator and operations with a pipeline company. And I recall an instance where the pipeline was damaged in Burnaby, that Burnaby Inlet, and it was damaged by a contractor, hid it spewed oil, and it went into the Barard inlet, not Burnaby, Barard Inlet. And I remember at the time that, I mean, social media was in its infancy. YouTube was like the only one, and people were taking

images of that disaster and posting it to YouTube, and the pipeline company was nowhere to be seen. And pipeline companies, they've been beat up in the industry by the media and in the public forum, and they become very conservative.

(26:12):

They're not going to grasp social media, but I think that's changed. I think people realize, I think industry in general, I'm not picking on pipeline companies, it sounds like I am, I'm not, but I think people in general, industry in general, they realize the value of social media that if we're not out there defending ourselves or setting the record straight, people are going to do that for us and they could lead everybody down the wrong path. Are you seeing that impact now more so than ever before, that those who have the greatest risk are getting engaged on social media and trying to set the record straight?

Tim Conrad (26:49):

Yeah, more so, yeah, it's improved substantially. And I'll pick on the energy industry because

Mike Sullivan (26:57):

You did, because I did bring them up.

Tim Conrad (27:00):

They were one of the worst at it, to be honest, at the start. And I was an observer watching how they responded to certain things. And it's like, you got to be on this. And it's not only that, but you have to build a relationship with the people before that because they don't know who you are otherwise. So they're not going to trust you if they don't know you. So energy companies are trying, they're trying to do a better job of that. They're definitely trying to catch up on that. And it's kind of shocking to me because it's like you're an industry that has good deep pockets. You can afford this. It's not expensive work doing this. And it helps to show that you find the community important. So it does build that trust and reputation, and it helps you when you get into that moment. It showed with the luck Tink incident with, everybody remembers that rail man.

Mike Sullivan (28:06):

Oh, that was horrible.

Tim Conrad (28:06):

The CEO O just completely, nobody knew who this company was. And then he comes in, he was just a fricking jerk.

Mike Sullivan (28:12):

He was a wrong guy

Tim Conrad (28:14):

He was not the right person to be speaking there. So it just destroyed that relationship. Immediately after burning up a community,

Mike Sullivan (28:22):

Somebody asked him, what is your company worth? He said, A lot less than yesterday. I mean, just completely OBT two, right?

Tim Conrad ([28:29](#)):

Yeah. And so that you really have to think about who you're going to put out front, and I'm very particular about that. I want to make sure I'm putting the right people out front to speak, because the last thing you want is somebody like that that's arrogant and doesn't get it and doesn't get the impact on people.

Mike Sullivan ([28:51](#)):

April is safe digging or dig safe month right across Canada, and I have to give kudos to one of our neighbors to the East Saskatchewan. They do a tremendous job. The Saskatchewan Common Ground Alliance has been running contractor safety breakfasts every April for just about 30 years, maybe even longer than 30 years. And I tell you, they have figured out the secret potion to do that. The secret sauce, they run a number over, I think it's over 20 some odd breakfast across the province, and they meet with hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of excavators every April promoting click before you dig promoting to make a locate request every time, and to follow the locate requirements when they're working near bird utilities and overhead utilities as well. So kudos to Saskatchewan Common Ground Alliance and their annual contractor breakfasts. If you are listening in Saskatchewan, please go out to one of these breakfasts. You will be well fed and you will be well-informed. Do you work with clients to train people, do crisis communications training?

Tim Conrad ([30:04](#)):

Yes, absolutely. Yeah, I do crisis communications training. We do spokesperson training to get you prepared and coaching in the moment if you need it to get you prepared for those moments. But I can't say it enough. You have to ooze empathy. It's not about you at all at that point in,

Mike Sullivan ([30:23](#)):

If you have it, you can enhance

Tim Conrad ([30:25](#)):

It, you can deal with the stuff about you later.

Mike Sullivan ([30:26](#)):

If you have that natural empathy and be genuine, you can enhance it. But if you don't have it, probably shouldn't even be there. Yeah,

Tim Conrad ([30:33](#)):

Exactly. Yeah. So you got to keep those types of people off the camera.

Mike Sullivan ([30:36](#)):

No, I agree. And lack of GaN and St. Lawrence, whatever that company was, that was the wrong guy, and what a horrible thing that was. We kind of picked on the energy industry a little bit, but I got to say, in my knowledge of the transmission pipeline companies particularly, they do a great job. I mean, they have community investment, public relations, indigenous relations. They do a tremendous amount of

work in the background. And like you said, they get to know their stakeholders, whether that's the community, the landowner, the digging community, the emergency responders, they have a tremendous amount of outreach on the social media side. It's very corporate, and I think that's all by design, and they do own that part of it, but there's a hesitation. I think this is just my interpretation, there's a hesitation to get maybe too folksy on social media, and I get that they want to maintain their corporate branding, but they do a lot of that outreach to become that trusted resource with their ongoing programs and employment of people who work with those communities, whether community investment, tremendous amount of community investment goes on, or the indigenous relations, public relations, community relations, all of that.

[\(32:09\)](#):

There's a lot of time and equity spent there and resources spent there so that if something should happen, then they do. So I am not aware of actually any other industry that presents a potential risk to communities that goes to that degree. I worked with a major railway company many years ago, and I don't recall it doing that, then don't recall that it does that. Now, if the rail industry required of its governed companies to conduct the amount of public awareness, engagement, and emergency management training that pipeline companies are required to do, there would be a lot more awareness. And that simply doesn't exist. If you look at legislation regulation, it doesn't exist. And yet that is clearly, clearly where the higher risk is. Am I pointing figures? Yeah, I guess I am. But I mean, it's because I know this, and this is what concerns me, is okay, they might say, you see the train, you see the train tracks, you see the crossings, you can hear it, then you're aware of it.

[\(33:33\)](#):

Sure, I'm aware that's a train here and it comes by 10 times a day or whatever it might be. But am I aware what's on that train? Is it just grain or is it propane? Is it butane? What's on that? It's a chlorine, and every single product has its own emergency response measures. And if there's a spill, what just spilled? What can we do? What is the emergency planning zone? How close or how far can we be? So that's a big concern. And for somebody like yourself, you arrive at a situation like this, what can we do? And all this information you have to, first you got to find it, and then you got to be able to deliver it. There's got to be situations that you've gotten into over the years where you're wondering, okay, I don't know what to tell people. What do you tell them when you don't know what to tell them?

Tim Conrad [\(34:29\)](#):

Yeah, that's a real struggle. The important thing is to say something, to get something out. There's in the industry communications golden hour. So I have a snippet in this book that Doug Levy wrote. He's out of the US and it's called the Communications Golden Hour. So he's really taken that on, but there is this golden hour of which you need to get base information out about what has happened. And we just saw with the Key bridge down in Baltimore, a really good example of doing it well in that first bit of time. So I got up that morning and immediately knew what was going on. They had done some briefings with the public already and told them what the situation was and so on. So they acknowledged the situation. Number one, acknowledged it exists because believe it or not, some places don't do that. Some places

Mike Sullivan [\(35:29\)](#):

It's like,

Tim Conrad [\(35:30\)](#):

Gosh, just acknowledge that it happened, please,

[\(35:34\)](#):

And so acknowledge it's happened, acknowledge the impact on people, and then talk about what action you're taking. That's pretty simple. There's three things that you can do right off the go. You don't need much. Those are three lines. And get that information out in some way to people and then start to build from there, because it does take time. It's tough. There's so much information with large emergencies that comes together and it's feverish and it's hard to piece together and figure out what is going on and what's the most important thing for people to know. So the trick that is important, and this was in the Calgary floods was a point that came out of that. If it's information, get it out. If it's just simple information, the bridge is gone. Okay, get that information out. The bridge is gone. You don't need to think about how you're going to present that and what you need, how we're going to rebuild it, all that stuff. Just tell 'em the bridge is gone and then start to get into what's next. So yeah, we often get stuck because we don't think what to say, but do it knowledge of what's going on, action of what you're taking, and be the empathy of how the impact is on people, and just follow those three messages each time that you're in front of the mic, and you'll do pretty good

Mike Sullivan ([37:01](#)):

In your view, when is an emergency over?

Tim Conrad ([37:07](#)):

Well, when we're in an emergency, there's the response. And the response is when all of the immediate things are happening and you're really still reacting to what's going on. And once we start to sort of start, that switch starts to turn to return to normal, that's when we're in recovery. And that's a stage that gets lost a lot, and we don't pay enough attention to that. That is an extremely important stage, and in my belief, when we get into an emergency, we should be starting to plan for recovery immediately. It's a big, big long process for a lot of things. So a wildfire ripping through a community, it's going to take years to rebuild. They're saying a lot of academic studies have said it's seven years for a community to recover from a lot of large disasters. So recovery is a very long time. You might only have 48 hours of damage that happens, and then you're going to have seven years of recovery. The response ends, but the emergency continues in recovery. And don't let your foot off the pedal keep going because people still need information. They are, honestly, they're in their most vulnerable when they're in recovery, that's when they go through all of the stages of mental, well, the

Mike Sullivan ([38:35](#)):

Emotional part really goes

Tim Conrad ([38:36](#)):

Through a rocky, rocky road. So don't leave them hanging. When people really struggle, oh, they lose hope. You need to really, yeah, they lose hope. Exactly.

Mike Sullivan ([38:46](#)):

The reality of the situation hits them and they lose hope.

Tim Conrad ([38:49](#)):

Yeah, absolutely.

Mike Sullivan ([38:50](#)):

Yeah. Now for our listeners, what are some practical tips you could offer to improve their own crisis communications plans, whether they're in utility safety, construction, or any field susceptible to emergencies? What could you offer?

Tim Conrad ([39:05](#)):

Yeah, I think that we really need to focus on planning, preparation, practice. Boy, I'll tell you, I get called in when I show up a lot of the time. That means that things aren't going so well because they've tried things that they've tried and it's not working. And so they look for somebody that's got stronger skills and a team that can come in. And almost always, I walk in and I go, where's your plan? Do you have a crisis communications plan? Do you have media monitoring in place? Do you have your social channels? All these things. And it's shocking how many times they walk in, and we don't have any of that, and we have to build it in the midst of it, which is not fun.

([39:58](#)):

And so work on those tools. I know that it's interesting, like crisis communications plans. Often organizations will get them and then they'll set them on a shelf and not use them. And I always tell people, pull that thing out because that's actually good day to day. You can use that thing for. So I worked for a utility that did water wastewater solid waste. And so we built it right into our crisis communications plan that when we had a water outage for five residents, the crisis communications plan got put to work. So we were always using it. That meant we were practicing it, and then we were refining it and realizing, okay, we got to change this a little bit. This isn't going to work. And so when we did have bigger incidents, we were ready for it, and we had a terrible thing happen where a body ended up in our landfill from somebody that was murdered, and it just happened.

([40:57](#)):

We had all of our tools in place. So I had had a van built that could serve as a command unit and could serve as an office for me and our team if we needed it. And we had our crisis communications plan in place, and literally the day before we turned on our media monitoring, so we were fully ready. And when we got the call and I was good, it was kind of interesting because my team's like, well, do we need to come in and start? Really? I said, no, we'll start at seven. We're good. We got everything. We're good, and we were fine. We were prepared, and we were able to support through that. So there was no panic. And you don't want that panic? No, because it

Mike Sullivan ([41:40](#)):

Shows. Oh, it does show. Yeah.

Tim Conrad ([41:41](#)):

It shows when people see it,

Mike Sullivan ([41:43](#)):

Especially in a crisis situation, you need to be calm. And if you're not,

Tim Conrad ([41:49](#)):

So I can't say it enough, we don't do it. That we don't go through those steps of planning out what we need to do, preparing the things that we need and practicing them, really putting intentional effort into

practicing and being critical of our stuff. It's fine. Boy, I tell you, it just drives me absolutely batty. When somebody tells me, it's like, oh, well, I'm criticizing something, and they take it personal. This is not personal. It's going to be personal. If you leave it there and you try to go in front of the public and at some point in time and it fails, then it's going to be personal and you're going to have a lot of people angry at you as a person. So do the hard work, but don't take it personally. You got to be critical of your stuff and make improvements. So really encourage people to work on that. Now, we just don't do enough in that. And then learn afterwards. If you have an incident, always take time to learn. Listen to what people are saying, gather that information and be intentional about the listening, and be intentional about going back to the people and saying, we heard you and we're going to make these changes. And then that way you see improvement the next time.

Mike Sullivan ([43:02](#)):

Plan, do review and learn. Right? Yeah. Tim, thanks so much for joining me today. This has been always good. And you can apply this to major industry. You can apply this to your own home. Absolutely. And the best way to be prepared for crisis is to avoid one entirely. So that ounce of prevention, right? Wouldn't that be, it's so true. But Tim, I really appreciate you joining me today, and I look forward to perhaps seeing you down the road sometime.

Tim Conrad ([43:29](#)):

All right. Thanks very much. Appreciate it, Mike.

Mike Sullivan ([43:33](#)):

That's going to wrap things up on the Safety Moment podcast. I want to thank our producers stories and strategies, and I hope you choose to follow this podcast on any directory you're listening on. And please do leave a rating. You can follow us on Twitter or X, I'm still not crazy about that new handle. But anyway, you can follow us there at Utility Safety, and we're also on Instagram and Facebook. If you'd like to send us a note, maybe you have an episode idea, email us at info@utilityofsafety.ca and put podcast in the subject header. I'm Mike Sullivan, president of Utility Safety Partners. Click to know what's above and below. One click costs you nothing. Not clicking could cost you everything.