

History Leaders Responding to Public Tragedies: The Right Thing

November 7, 2018

From Charleston to Las Vegas, Boston to Brussels, public tragedies have become all too commonplace. Should history leaders respond? Why or why not? If so, what might they do help minimize such tragedies from occurring in the first place? What might they do both immediately afterwards and in the long term to sustain healing? What are both the risks and the rewards? Drawing on his own experience and that of others, George McDaniel, President, McDaniel Consulting led a discussion about such questions and the Associates developed the following draft list of questions to prepare a history organization in the event a public tragedy strikes before, immediately after, and long-term. Every community and history organization is different and should develop its own response but this list may provide a useful starting point for its plan. For more information about the History Leadership Institute, visit HistoryLeadership.org.

A. Questions to Consider Before a Tragedy

1. Define “what is a tragedy?”
2. Who would speak for organization person best suited for the role? Who is doing the communicating and how? What support will you offer to staff members who are dealing with this?
3. Trauma training for staff?
4. Who (departments) take the lead? Is it collections people or programs/educators/those trained for dialogue? Each department should have a role that best suits them.
5. How to respond and read community (community fatigue)?
6. What do we do besides collect dialogue, space for memory or commemoration?
7. A tragedy preparedness plan? How will we share what we’re doing? How do cultural organizations collaborate to collect? What are difference cultural organization’s roles art, history, oral history, ex. Smithsonian showing up in St. Louis. Show community the importance of event? “Your place matters.” What lessons of the past can inform the future? What can we learn from people doing this work now, ex. 9/11 Memorial and Museum? Whose trauma, whose memory? Voyeurism?
8. Tragedies of the past as example and these themes are still here today. When is the right time to act?
9. How is first contact made? Who is in charge? Who are leaders of communities? How do we deal with people who disagree with what we’re doing?
10. What resources do we have that could be useful? (physical space) What skills and abilities can we provide? How will the response be funded? Do we have the capacity to collect? If we don’t, who does? What will be collected and what language may be used?
11. Who are our community partners? Who else could help us? Who are our volunteers?
12. Are there any conversations that we need to have with the board prior to a tragedy? (whether it be on taking a stand/raising money/who makes the decision to act/etc).
13. Setting up a process for how we would move forward quickly. Who are our community partners? What is the capacity of the staff to participate? What if they’re affected by the tragedy? Can they opt out?

14. Should this be part of our emergency preparedness plan? What is our relationship with emergency response teams? How does it fit into our mission? And what will or will not we respond to? How will share that you're going to help (communication plan).
15. No right way to do it but there is an empathetic way to do it? Bring in colleagues (both inside and outside of the field) who have dealt with this to learn from them and create a framework for how to deal with this?
16. How do we, or do we, work with journalists to collect or document? Understand various interpretations of the event? Editorial decisions and ethics?
17. Simulate public tragedy/fire drill for emergency plan. Communication with law enforcement/community.
18. Communication about museum's plan for response.

B. Questions to Consider Immediately After a Public Tragedy

1. In the moment: Do we have the capacity? Does we have the skills and ability? How will we help the staff prioritize this with their other duties, upcoming exhibits and events? Will we need to cancel events immediately coming up (like a onenight fundraiser)? Do we need to acknowledge the tragedy at this event or use it to donate to the survivors?
2. What is our role in the tragedy? Educate community? Support staff?
3. What groups can we partner with? Use your network to determine who can respond best/has the connection to the community/ the resources. Should they or you take charge? Can you support another organization in dealing with this?
4. What supplies do we need? How do we get them?
5. What do we collect from outside the site (media)?
6. What other tragedies in our community historically would this trigger responses about?
7. Should the physical space of the museum be the anchor or should it be elsewhere in the community?
8. Do we need a police presence and/or safety/security?
9. How are we responsibly communicating with community, survivors, and staff? Do we need other professionals such as counselors? What formal language and stance do we have publicly including with the media.
10. Where is triage central and command center and storage? Do we preserve the site itself?
11. How do you select which items are preserved? What items and oral histories will help researchers in 50 years? How can we reflect all points of view? How will emotion and changing memory affect how we remember this event and how do we still reflect the essence of what happened?
12. Can we get clear title? Or do we need to compromise on these matters? What if someone wants something back?
13. How do we avoid bias since we are perhaps members of that community which is struck?
14. Will the preservation of such items help or inhibit the healing process? Ask the survivors and consider the community as a whole.
15. What can we share to help teachers, students, and neighbors as unique audiences? What resources can we share?
16. Who will fund? If we are, how will it impact our budget and how do we make it work?

17. How do we balance the needs of the community vs being self-serving to collect for our own organization?
18. How do you gather, establish, and represent the context for the event? What about people who don't want their stories to be remembered ("wrong" side of history, minority opinion, etc)?
19. How do we balance healing vs preservation?
20. Who owns a tragedy?

C. Questions after Tragedy: In the Long Term

1. Are we best to be the long-term stewards of artifacts?
2. What is the long-term deaccession/policy repercussions of having these things?
3. Continued funding for ongoing commitment—How? Who? How much?
4. Does this event/tragedy and immediate actions cause issues with donors in the long term (they might have been with you early on, but not later)? How to address with unified messaging/justification language?
5. How to do the care and feeding of community relationships (to keep healthy or maybe even ending)?
6. How to keep story relevant as history to others who are not directly impacted (new people in town, etc.)
7. Having long-term impact—both inspiring change and/or recording ongoing struggle?
8. How to get buy in from change makers?
9. How to evaluate/debrief?
10. How to connect to nationwide events and struggles?
11. What if people don't want to remember? Right to forget?
12. How to balance/compromise with changing community needs over time? Dialogue?
13. How to continue relationships?
14. How to prevent future tragedies?
15. How to make story relevant in 50 to 100 years?
16. Can and how to make active statements of advocacy?
17. How to make it sustainable?
18. How do we choose to memorialize/remember on anniversaries or other moments?
19. How to share with colleagues? How to share what we're doing with the field (before and after)? Documentation, publishing, etc.
20. Evaluation and implementation of changes to plan

D. Circling Around...

1. How to fundraise for future tragedy, esp. after a tragedy?
2. What funding models can work for future tragedy?