

Survivor's CORNER

Weathering the Storm: Personal Crisis Management Tips

On occasion we share the inspirational story of a cancer survivor. For this edition, we are pleased to share a narrative from 61-year old **Ronald J. Levine** (right), a partner in the Princeton office of the Herrick, Feinstein LLP law firm, where he is co-chair of the Litigation Department. Diagnosed in 2007 with Hodgkin's lymphoma, Levine – who is also a member of the Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey Director's Advisory Board – looked to the strategies he used with clients in handling a crisis and applied them to his battle with cancer.



In 2007, I was marking my 30th year of practicing law, representing companies in high visibility product liability claims. I also was busy advising clients, and giving lectures, on the topic of crisis management, having learned first-hand that companies are not always given a sixty-day notice that a crisis is coming. That summer, when I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, it was quite a shock, especially since I had been feeling generally fine, working out regularly, and had no real symptoms.

I now had a major crisis – my own. It was unexpected and certainly not part of my “plan.” A husband and father to two daughters, with concerned parents and in-laws, and a senior partner in a major law firm, I had many responsibilities.

I was facing an uncertain future. Assuming all went well, I would have to weather six months of chemotherapy, and then radiation. My treatment would be no secret – I was going to lose my hair for sure – and that would be the least of it. My contact with people and my entire lifestyle would have to be adjusted. What to do? In part, I looked to the four step crisis management lessons I had been preaching to my clients, which ultimately comes down to being prepared in advance.

What follows are those steps, and how I adapted them for my personal crisis:

STEP ONE: Be ready for action.

Set up an internal communications system that can be activated almost immediately in any emergency situation. Key participants must be identified in advance: public relations specialists, accountants, compliance officer, and corporate counsel.

When faced with my personal situation, my wife and I prepared our own crisis management manual. We had lists of experts to consult, articles on the illness and records to be gathered. We assembled crisis managers, including doctors, financial consultants and close friends whose judgment we respected. I also had “spokespeople.” My wife sent out emails to friends and family to let them know about the course of my treatment, and my secretary communicated with my colleagues. For clients, I dealt with them directly, telling them I would continue to service them as before. Thanks to the support of my colleagues, I did not lose any clients or business throughout my treatment.

STEP TWO: Communicate quickly, but accurately.

Remember, the news media will get the information out whether or not your company cooperates. Being the first to react puts the company in control of the situation.

The company should make every effort to avoid the typical “no comment” response. Cancer has an obvious stigma, and I did not consider my diagnosis to be a “plus” in my ability to retain and attract clients. I also

feared that my colleagues would begin to plan my exit from my law firm. Taking a page from my “never say no comment” playbook, I decided to share as much information as possible with my colleagues. I explained my condition – and the anticipated cure – to anyone who would listen. I also tried to stay visible. Being present is important to reassure your colleagues that you will survive the crisis.

STEP THREE:
Do the right thing.

Do not minimize a serious problem nor blow minor incidents out of proportion.

Setting the tone and determining the frequency of communications about a personal crisis can be challenging. The emails about my condition – which were written by my wife or by me – were balanced and fairly objective. We thanked everyone for their concern and did not sugarcoat the situation. The updates also were not doom and gloom, and they provided honest and accurate reports on my condition and progress.

STEP FOUR:
Follow up.

Learn from the crisis. When appropriate, make amends to those affected and then do whatever is necessary to restore the organization’s reputation. With proper planning and preventive measures, a company truly can pull out of a crisis in a much stronger condition.

The most important lesson I learned from my experience is to live every day to its fullest and not to sweat the small stuff. By sharing my experience, I have tried to give meaning to my own crisis by helping others through theirs. As has been the case for my clients – few of our colleagues are prepared for crises and have much to learn from those who have weathered the storm. By staying involved with the Cancer Institute of New Jersey, I have been privileged to be able to put my experiences to good use and to work with patients and their families who are facing these same challenges. ■

525,600 Reasons to Celebrate!

From being nominated for a Tony Award to becoming engaged (with a diagnosis of ovarian cancer and treatment in between), Broadway star **Valisia LeKae** (right) described her journey over the past 525,600 minutes – or one year – to more than 200 guests gathered for the annual **Survivors Day** celebration hosted by **Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey** in June. The inspirational talk capped off a special luncheon at the **Hyatt New Brunswick**.

