



# WHEN disaster strikes

**Imagine you've just started your job as news director when a major disaster strikes. You might be tempted to jump in and start producing coverage, but that may not be the best idea. Here's some advice from news managers who have faced major crises while still fairly new on the job.**

“I would never wish that upon anybody, but ... immediately I got to see the great journalism and the quality people. To be able to share those stories allowed us to have a common playing field.”

Angie Kucharski, former news director • KCNC-TV • Denver, CO  
(arrived on the job six days before students were massacred at Columbine High School.)

## Trust the staff

Step back and let other people help guide coverage, says Angie Kucharski, vice president at WBZ-TV in Boston, who guided KCNC-TV in Denver through its coverage of the Columbine massacre. “Throughout that ordeal we were going to have to stop down pretty frequently to do some temperature checks so I could get feedback about how they thought the coverage was going,” she says.

## Let leaders emerge

Be ready to recognize anyone who's stepping up to perform in a time of crisis, says Anzio Williams, news director at WDSU-TV in New Orleans. He'd been there eight months when Hurricane Katrina hit. “I had two managers who did not do well at all, but I had a reporter who was a natural leader, and he's gone on to be a news director. I had a photographer, a former military guy, you say something and he's executing. I might have put my EPs in charge of groups, but when I saw different people stepping up, I put them in charge of groups. The people who should have been in charge, just by title, didn't challenge or question it.”

## Coordinate the process

When there's chaos all around you, put systems in place to manage it. "My role was to start a plan in motion and provide some structure, knowing that it was going to involve a lot of consensus and a lot of listening," Kucharski says. Joyce Reed arrived at KWTW in Oklahoma City as news director three weeks before the Murrah Federal Building was bombed in 1995. "I put some structure into funneling correct information to the anchors," she says. "What we had covered, who was where."

## Ask for help

Resist the urge to make big decisions by yourself. Call for corporate backup as soon as you think you might need it, says Williams. Make sure you know your company philosophy, what your support team is, and whom to call when disaster strikes.

## Be useful

Kucharski says that as a new person in town she was better off being in the booth screening questionable live pictures than on the desk trying to contact law enforcement or setting up boundaries for live trucks because she didn't know the players or the geography. Reed, who is now vice president of strategy for Griffin Communication, also took on the job of monitoring the station's coverage and the competition.

## Take care of people

The staff needs to hear from you that you are going to take care of them, says Williams. As the hurricane approached, he gave his staff time to take care of their families and belongings. "I told them, you need to take this day on me, you need to go take care of your situations, because as it approaches, I need you to work for me," he says. "There were a few times when I said, you go be with your family and evacuate because I knew that person being with us would make it harder on the rest of the team." When the crisis hits, put a work schedule in place, and make people rest or go home. In Oklahoma City, nobody wanted to leave but Reed insisted.

## Watch your tone

The newsroom will be a reflection of you, Williams says, so the tone of the leader's voice is important. "When I have a sense of urgency, they will have a sense of urgency. If I have a calm demeanor, they will have a calmer demeanor. If I am joking and playing around, they know everything's going to be all right," he says. "That was a tough balance for me, knowing when to crack the whip, when to be playful and joking."

## Stress safety

Make sure the staff knows what you expect of them. "I am a gung-ho type news director; I push my people to be competitive, to have more than the other guys, and this was a point where I needed them to step back, so it was the reverse of everything I had been preaching," Williams says. "I told them it's better to come back alive than to be live in the storm. I had to come up with a message, 'alive over live,' and I made sure they heard me and the other mid-tier managers heard me."

