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*QUALITATIVE RESEARCH–  
CASE STUDIES*

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**Crisis Management in Real Time:  
How to Successfully  
Plan for and Respond to a Crisis**

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**ABSTRACT.** On April 23, 2002, the Metrolink Commuter Rail System in Southern California experienced a crisis when a Burlington Northern Santa Fe freight train collided into a Metrolink train that was carrying upwards of 300 passengers. Three passengers were killed and 260 passengers were injured. This paper examines the crisis management efforts of Metrolink to maintain its organizational reputation. Relevant literatures from crisis management and crisis communication develop a theory-based case study of this crisis. Findings from the in-

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Journal of Promotion Management, Vol. 12(3/4) 2006  
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JPM>  
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doi:10.1300/J057v12n03\_06

vestigation demonstrate that Metrolink was successful in their crisis management and crisis communication efforts. Based upon these findings, the authors provide prescriptions for organizations experiencing crisis. Specifically, organizations must take a proactive approach to crisis management by developing crisis management plans. Crisis management plans establish the crisis management team and outline the crisis communication activities necessary to successfully restore consumer confidence and maintain organizational reputation. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Crisis communication, crisis leadership, crisis management, crisis plans, organizational reputation

### INTRODUCTION

Loss of market share, increased regulatory scrutiny and control, stockholder discontent, decreased employee morale, bankruptcy and organizational failure—these are but some of the potential effects of organizational crises. However, many, if not all, of these problems can be successfully mitigated if the organization has *proactively* developed crisis management plans that include, among other things, the establishment of the crisis management team and the development of the crisis communication plan.

A key element of crisis management plans is risk or issues management. The organization must ask itself what potential threats exist that could harm the organization. Once identified, potential threats must then be rank-ordered in terms of likelihood and severity. In other words, different organizations are at risk for different kinds of crises (likelihood) and some crises are potentially more significant than others (severity). Assessing the potential likelihood and severity of all possible crises is an enormous task, but it is a task that must be undertaken to ensure the well-being of the organization when a crisis hits. Quite simply, an organization will be better able to respond to a crisis event if it has planned for that specific crisis type in advance.

Another key element of the crisis management plan is the establishment of a reliable communications infrastructure that will be used

during the crisis. Organizations must be able to communicate with internal and external stakeholders during and after crisis events to maintain a consistent image (Massey, 2001). Communications technologies such as telephone (land lines, wireless, and satellite), text-and traditional pagers, e-mail systems, Internet and intranet systems must be built into the plan so that both internal and external communication channels remain open and a consistent message emanates from the organization.

In this manuscript we analyze the crisis management efforts of Metrolink, the Los Angeles-based commuter rail system in Southern California. On April 23, 2002, a Metrolink train collided with a Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) freight train, killing three passengers and injuring over 260 others. We focus on the preparation of Metrolink's crisis management plan, the implementation of the crisis management team, and on Metrolink's management of this incident. Before addressing the case, however, it is first necessary to address relevant literature in crisis management and crisis communication.

### ***Crisis Management***

A crisis is a major, unpredictable event that threatens to harm the organization and its stakeholders. Although crisis events are unpredictable, they are not unexpected (Coombs, 1999). Furthermore, organizations are experiencing crisis more frequently now than ever before, due to a variety of factors including industrialization, increased reliance on technology, and increased media scrutiny of organizational actions (Ogrizek and Guillery, 1999; Perrow, 1984; Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, 1998). Because of this, crisis management is a field that has experienced tremendous growth since the late 1970s (Barton, 1993; Coombs, 1995). Crisis management is the systematic attempt to avoid organizational crises or to manage those crisis events that do occur (Pearson and Clair, 1998). There are technical and administrative aspects of crisis (Perrow, 1984), and therefore crisis management involves (1) attempts to eliminate technological failure, and (2) the development of formal communication systems to either avoid or manage crisis situations (Barton, 2001).

Crisis management literature has focused primarily on the development of the crisis management plan (CMP) (Coombs, 1999). A CMP "consists of a full range of thoughtful processes and steps that anticipate the complex nature of crisis real and perceived" (Caywood and Stocker, 1993, p. 411). Because CMPs are developed in anticipation of crises before they occur, CMPs allow for speedier and more efficient responses

to crises when they do occur (Barton, 1993, 1995, 2001; Coombs, 1999). More organizations now have CMPs than ever before and that number continues to rise (Coombs, 1999).

Two components of the CMP that are most relevant to this investigation are the Crisis Communication Plan and the Crisis Management Team (CMT). Crisis communication plans prescribe the specific organizational communication actions to be implemented to either prevent crisis from occurring, or to manage communication when crisis occurs. The development of the CMT is a key organizational communication initiative to put in place representatives from the relevant organizational units, so that when crisis does hit, everyone knows their own responsibilities, as well as the contact information and responsibilities of all other members of the team.

The development of the CMP represents a proactive approach to organizational crisis that involves strategic planning. Four specific areas of planning will be reviewed here: crisis definition, crisis management strategies, crisis communication planning, and strategies for image restoration accounting.

### *Crisis Definitions*

There seem to be as many different definitions of crisis as there are possible types of crises. However, there is general agreement among researchers that a crisis involves some sort of extraordinary disruption of routine that threatens organizational legitimacy and erodes reputation. The precise definition of a crisis is difficult to define because, at its core, "crisis management is a topic in numerous disciplines including public relations, rhetoric, management, and organizational psychology" (Coombs, 2000, p. 99).

Some crisis definitions are derived by focusing on specific negative impacts to the organization (Lukaszewski, 2001). The cluster-definition theory is based upon particular "crisis clusters" that are overlaid onto an X-Y axis, with the X-axis running along a severe-to-normal impact spectrum and the Y-axis running along a technical-to-human effects spectrum (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992). A matrix approach toward defining crisis assesses first whether a crisis is external or internal and then whether the crisis was intentional or unintentional (Coombs, 1995).

Steven Fink (1986), in his germinal text on crisis development and management, defines a crisis as "an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decision change is impending," resulting in either a highly desirable or highly undesirable outcome (p. 15). The interesting perspective

to Fink's definition is the inference that crisis can offer a dual result, as both threat and opportunity. This approach is further extended by Christine Pearson and Judith Clair (1998) with the suggestion that "crises have dual meanings as well as dual outcomes" (see also Penrose, 2000, p. 157). Crises therefore need to be understood both in terms of how they are perceived and how they are addressed. "Our crisis definitions, perceptions and subsequent actions are inextricably linked" (Nathan, 2000, p. 13).

More specifically, crisis can be characterized as the confluence of human, organizational and technology failures combined with regulatory, infrastructure and preparedness shortcomings within the organization (Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller, and Miglani, 1998). A crisis can have an adverse impact on employees, products, services, financial condition and overall reputation (Barton, 1993). A crisis can be defined by various characteristics or key elements, including insufficient information, escalating flow of events, loss of control, outside scrutiny, adoption of a siege mentality, organizational panic and institutional short-term focus (Umansky, 1993). The three elements of crisis are "surprise, high threat to important values, and a short decision time" (Holsti, 1978, p. 41).

Thierry Pauchant and Ian Mitroff (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992) refer to a crisis as a "distortion that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its existential core" (p. 15). They move beyond static definitions of crises by building a definitional continuum that highlights the dynamics of crises through four distinct phases of "incident," "accident," "conflict" and "crisis." The key to understanding the continuum is to accept that not all crises can be viewed from the same perspective; each is unique in development and phase, and correspondingly, each requires different philosophical approaches and management techniques.

### ***Crisis Management***

Regardless of what parameters are set in defining a crisis, and regardless of differences in terminology between crises, emergencies, accidents, or incidents, reality dictates that organizations must take swift action to deal with reputation-related problems once they occur (Massey and Larsen, 2003). Remedial action requires advance planning through the development of a crisis management plan (Massey, 2001), and a confidence on behalf of the organization to commit to that plan. As mentioned, in every crisis resides both a threat and an opportunity (Penrose, 2000). However, "many organizations faced with crisis or

tough times have been known to deny, shut off, self-seal, cut down and use other means of self-defense that can keep the organization from rising above the threat it faces so that it can find opportunity” (Nathan, 2000, p. 13). Crisis management, in all its multidisciplinary forms (Coombs, 1999), is the direct intent to both divert crisis in advance and to manage crisis once erupted (Pearson and Clair, 1998). Most crisis management approaches are derived from the realization that improvement in crisis management “means saving lives, financial resources, and reputations and other valuable resources” (Coombs, 1999, p. x).

Given the different interpretations of crisis, the development of a universally applicable crisis management approach is next to impossible (Burnett, 1998). However, nearly all CMPs have certain elements in common, including a risk audit of potential crisis, audience definition, operational procedures, roles and responsibilities, a communications element and an evaluative section (Penrose, Rasberry, and Myers, 1997).

One way crisis management scholars have attempted to centralize theory, research and practice of crisis management is to design process models (Penrose, 2000). In 1983, an early 6-step crisis management development model focused on organizational structure, team design, training, auditing, planning and actual crisis management (Littlejohn, 1983). Littlejohn’s basic approach has been expanded many times by the introduction of new crisis management models (Milburn, Schuler and Watman, 1983; Mitroff, Pauchant, Finney and Pearson, 1992; Mitroff, Shrivistana and Udawadia, 1987).

Steven Fink’s (Fink, 1986) thoughts related to the need for scenario development, contingency planning, and articulation of acceptable outcomes laid the foundation for subsequent discussions concerning crisis management audits. Extending the discourse on crisis audits, Ian Mitroff (1988) developed the portfolio planning approach, which suggests that “a company may be able to group crises according to their underlying structural similarities” and align preventative strategies to each cluster (Penrose, 2000, p. 159).

Following an auspicious beginning in the 1980s much of the theory concerning crisis management remained relatively unchanged until the late 1990s when the concept of integrating crisis management into the broader and more holistic effort of strategic planning gained wider acceptance (Burnett, 1998; Prebel, 1997). In particular, Burnett’s ‘crisis classification matrix’ is directly linked to key organizational strategic elements and is a method of integrating crisis management into the organizational structure in order to enhance the overall strategic position of the organization (Burnett, 1998).

Thus, “whereas strategic management focuses on the offensive aspects of competing in the marketplace, crisis management deals with the defensive capabilities of the company. Whereas strategic management promotes the welfare of an organization, crisis management works to protect it” (Penrose, 2000, p. 159). We support Penrose’s argument, but believe that crisis management can also be offensive, or proactive in its development.

In moving from the generalities of the CMP, no case study can be adequately undertaken without a brief, more detailed review of crisis management sub-literature related specifically to the development and implementation of crisis communication plans.

### ***Crisis Communication Plans***

The need for crisis communication planning is on the rise (Coombs, 2000). Crisis communication plans deal with, on a micro level, what crisis management plans deal with on a macro level. Effective crisis communication plans address communications as a function—an active verb, rather than as a department—a passive noun. Both the planning and implementation elements of a rigorous crisis communication plan focus on the development of the CMT, the flexible execution of tactics, and the critical need to be linked strategically to the executive table.

At its core, a crisis communication plan is a critical, short-term component of long-term legitimacy management, which can be defined as “an ongoing process that involves gaining, maintaining, and in some cases regaining legitimacy for an organization” (Massey, 2001, p. 156). Legitimacy is derived from key stakeholders. From the perspective of crisis communication planning, legitimacy centers around the need to internally and externally communicate that the norms, values and beliefs of an organization—especially in times of crisis—are aligned with those of its constituent publics (Suchman, 1995). A crisis communication plan is the framework through which an organization exhibits that its actions correlate with societal expectations.

A truly value-added crisis communication plan will strive to do more than simply provide guidelines for communications after a crisis; it will provide tools and frameworks for crisis “signal detection,” “crisis prevention” and “crisis preparation” (Coombs, 2000). However, it should also be recognized that although a crisis communication plan is a key component to guide communications activity and decisions during a crisis, it is not a panacea that ensures success at maintaining organizational legitimacy. “Typically, a crisis forms as a sequence of events that

seems, over time, to gather volume and complexity with increasing speed, its dynamics therefore resemble that of a chaotic system as it iterates through increasingly complex phases toward a disordered state” (Murphy, 1996, p. 105). A crisis communication plan therefore demands flexibility in its application but it must be able to designate roles and responsibilities, sequencing of communications events and guidelines for spokespersons (Barton, 1993).

### *Crisis Management Teams*

The key to ensuring flexibility, and to ensuring that a crisis communication plan will survive intact, rests with the CMT. “While a crisis management plan is important, it is only as good as the team that uses it” (Coombs, 2000, p. 91). Francis Marra (1998) has demonstrated that the possession of a crisis communication plan does not necessarily equate to excellent organizational communication in times of crisis. Key to the maintenance of a highly effective CMT is the development of a positive and supportive communication culture within the entire organization, not just the public relations department (Grunig, 1992). Other studies have linked the importance of organizational culture, and by extension the need for teamwork, to crisis communications success (Dozier, Grunig and Grunig, 1995; Sriramesh and Grunig, 1988).

The CMT, part of the larger CMP, must include representatives from all the relevant organizational units, and specialists in communication who add to the CMT’s overall resource and knowledge base (Coombs, 1999). The key participants and their backups should be pre-identified from various corners of the organization and should include central departments including risk management, finance, operations, and legal (Fink, 1986). CMT membership should vary, depending on the nature of the issue and the expertise required (Barton, 1993; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Fink, 1986; Ten Berge, 1989), but it must also be remembered that “too large a group can render effective decision making unworkable” (Ten Berge, 1989, p. 40).

Once the CMT has been designated, it is responsible for identifying, isolating and managing the crisis and related communications responsibilities (Fink, 1986). The CMT is tasked with steering the organization through “a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence [of crisis] and thereby allows the organization to be in greater control of its own destiny” (Fearn-Banks, 2002, p. 18).

An effective crisis communication plan addresses issues management in the pre-crisis phase, crisis recognition and containment during the

crisis event and also identifies learning opportunities in the post-crisis period (Coombs, 2000). Specific to the post-crisis phase, the establishment of criteria for evaluating the success of a crisis communication plan is paramount, and includes an examination of the residual impact of the crisis, the financial implications of the crisis, the strategic factors of crisis management, and factors related to the industry, including decreased legitimacy and increased regulatory scrutiny (Sen and Egelhoff, 1991).

Research has shown that very few companies with written crisis plans have actually practiced, evaluated and re-aligned those plans to increase the likelihood of crisis communications effectiveness (Guth, 1995). Pre-crisis scenario testing and post-crisis evaluation are critical steps that keep a crisis communication plan both timely and effective (Barton, 1993).

### ***Image Restoration Accounting***

In order for a crisis communication plan to be truly effective, even if that plan is unified internally by strong strategic connections to the central management group and clarity of purpose among the CMT, it ultimately survives on the external acceptance of its key messages (Lukaszewski, 2001). The ability to account effectively during times of crisis is the hallmark of communication success, yet surprisingly, “an underdeveloped area of crisis management is what organizations say to publics” (Coombs, 1995). Effective communication, linked centrally to the concept of tying key messages to public value systems, can enhance organizational image in the post-crisis phase, can deflect criticism during the crisis phase, and can establish a “values premise” for ongoing discourse in case of crisis (Bostdorf and Vibbert, 1994).

Much of the theory regarding crisis communication accounting is grounded in attribution theory and related considerations of impression management (Allen and Caillouet, 1994) and apologia (Benoit, 1997). “From a symbolic perspective, crisis-response strategies should seek to protect the organizational image” (Coombs, 1995, p. 453).

A summary of crisis response strategies point to five specific approaches (Coombs, 1995). First are the “non-existent strategies” of denial, clarification, attack and intimidation, which seek to dismiss the claim of wrongdoing. Second are the “distance strategies” of excuse and justification, which seek to uncouple the connection between the organization and the crisis. Third are “ingratiating strategies” of bolstering, transcendence and praising others, which seek to engender public support on bases other than the crisis event. Fourth are “mortification

strategies” of remediation, repentance and rectification, which strive for public forgiveness. Finally is the “suffering strategy,” which endeavors to win public sympathy. Coombs (1995) has developed a series of flowcharts that lead to a specific crisis response based upon the type of crisis, the reliability of evidence, the degree of damage, victim status, and corporate performance (cf., Massey, 2002, 2005).

In similar approaches, other preventative and image restoration strategies focus upon denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, undertaking corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997), or avoidance, continuance and advocacy (Heath and Nelson, 1986; Bostdorff and Vibbert, 1994). In determining which strategy to use, crisis communicators must consider the audience they are addressing and the “opinion development phase” of that audience (Sturges, 1994) as well as the particular corporate or organizational relationships specific to those audiences (Ice, 1991). Ultimately, whatever accounting or response strategy an organization adopts during a crisis situation, they must “seek to establish congruence between the social values associated with or implied by their activities and the norms of acceptable behavior in the larger social system of which they are a part” (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975, p. 122).

In this case study, we analyze the efforts of Metrolink Commuter Rail System to align their values with those of society at large, and their stakeholders in particular. In the next section we present the crisis situation, the response by Metrolink to manage the crisis, and evaluate the effectiveness of Metrolink’s crisis communication efforts. Our analysis is guided by the following research questions, developed from crisis management theory:

- RQ1:* What role does the crisis management plan play in organizational crisis?
- RQ2:* What role does the crisis management team play in organizational crisis?
- RQ3:* Can successful crisis communication restore consumer confidence and protect the organization’s reputation?

### ***THE CASE***

Transportation is an ongoing problem in the United States generally, and Southern California specifically, and creates a public policy issue that creates public debate on the problem and how it can be

solved. According to the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies (CEERT, 2005) based in Sacramento, California:

The problem with transportation is multiple-fold. First, our transportation infrastructure . . . is heavily dependent on petroleum for fuel—a finite and polluting resource. Second, the petroleum cycle—encompassing the extraction, transportation, storage and refining of petroleum—has had grave environmental consequences, including contamination of drinking water, natural habitats, air quality and marine waters and wildlife. Third, the combustion of petroleum with internal combustion engines in vehicles, coupled with ever-increasing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) has polluted the air we breathe.

To alleviate transportation and pollution problems in Southern California, the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura formed the Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA) in 1991 to develop METROLINK, a regional commuter train system. Metrolink began service on October 26, 1992 with three lines. Today, Metrolink operates seven lines in Southern California, with approximately 34,000 one-way trips per day. Metrolink is one major effort to solve transportation, pollution, and related problems.

On April 23, 2002, a Metrolink commuter train collided with a BNSF freight train in Placentia, California. Three Metrolink passengers were killed and approximately 260 were injured in the crash. The resulting organizational crisis created many challenges for Metrolink, including implementation of the crisis management plan, coordination of the CMT, and internal and external communication with stakeholders.

Metrolink officials quickly acted to manage the crisis. CEO David Solow, Board Chairman Hal Bernson, Media Relations Advisor Sharon Gavin, Manager of External Communications Francisco Oaxaca, and many other Metrolink representatives worked the crisis to restore customer confidence and maintain the organization's reputation as a safe, convenient transportation alternative. News conferences, media interviews, news releases, and other communication activities were implemented to manage the crisis. In this section we will provide a detailed description of the crisis, and analyze the response of Metrolink to manage the crisis.

### *The Crisis*

On April 23, 2002, at approximately 8:10 a.m. (PDT), the mile-long BNSF #5340 freight train collided with Metrolink #809 commuter train with more than 300 passengers aboard. The Metrolink train experienced \$2.6 million in damages while the BNSF freight train suffered \$25,000 in damages. The crash occurred during Tuesday morning rush hour, which added to the complexity of the crisis. According to one witness, Jackie Bisesi, "I saw the [Metrolink] train sitting, at a stop, and I saw the other train coming and they were on the same track. It sounded like a bomb and it felt like an earthquake" (as reported by KNBC out of Los Angeles).

The crash occurred about 35 miles southeast of Los Angeles, in Placentia, Orange County, California. The crash was the second fatal train crash in less than two weeks in the U.S., which brought added media attention and scrutiny. The media spotlight was not limited to the region or even the nation. News representatives from around the world, including the BBC covered the story and conducted interviews with Metrolink representatives. Also, foreign embassies representing countries across the globe contacted Metrolink for information about their citizens possibly being aboard the train. Francisco Oaxaca, Metrolink Manager of External Communications, argues that this added attention by foreign embassies may have been the result of the attacks on September 11, 2001, and the foreign citizens who lost their lives that day in the United States.

On October 7, 2003 the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released its official report, stating that the BNSF train was responsible for the incident. Approximately two miles before the BNSF train crashed into the Metrolink train in Placentia, a yellow light signaled to the engineer that he should slow the train to 30 miles per hour (mph). According to the NTSB, "the BNSF 5340 crew members were focusing attention on their conversation rather than on the signals governing the operation of their train" (Railroad Accident Report, NTSB, 2003, p. 29). The BNSF train was traveling approximately 48 mph. "He did not slow the train at all," according to Marion C. Blakey, NTSB chairwoman. "He kept going full bore."

Just minutes later, the BNSF train was signaled by a red rail light to stop. At that point, however, the train was traveling too fast to stop. Although the engineer engaged the emergency brakes, it was not enough to prevent the BNSF train, traveling approximately 20 mph, from crashing into the Metrolink train, which had already come to a stop. The collision

caused two Metrolink passenger cars to derail. “There is no question that the Burlington Northern train should have stopped,” Blakey said. “The [Metrolink] train had the right of way.”

As a standard procedure, operators of the two trains were given alcohol and drug tests. According to the NTSB, “The results of the toxicology tests given to the dispatcher, conductors and engineers operating the freight train and Metrolink passenger train have been received. All five employees tested negative,” meaning that neither alcohol nor drugs played a part in the collision. The conclusions drawn from the NTSB investigation reveal that the primary cause of the crash was BNSF operator error. “Had the BNSF 5340 crew operated their train in accordance with the signal indications, the accident would not have occurred” (Railroad Accident Report, NTSB, 2003, p. 36).

Metrolink was therefore seen as the victim from the start of their crisis management efforts, which gave the organization an advantage, since those who are at fault in crises receive more negative evaluations by key stakeholders than do organizations that are perceived as victims (Massey, 2003). Regardless of Metrolink’s victimization status, effective communication with stakeholders was necessary. According to Gavin, “No matter whose fault this was, I would have been out at that site.” If Metrolink had not had representatives at the site, “it would have looked like we had something to hide” said Gavin. In the next section, we analyze Metrolink’s crisis management strategy and the ways they communicated with organizational stakeholders during this crisis. Much of the information obtained is based on an interview that took place on October 8, 2002, at Metrolink’s headquarters in Los Angeles between spokesperson Sharon Gavin and the first author (see Appendix A for the complete interview).

### *The Response*

To analyze Metrolink’s response, it is necessary to first go back to Metrolink’s proactive efforts at crisis management, which took place approximately five years before this incident with the development of a crisis management plan. Metrolink’s CMP is an excellent example of proactively anticipating potential threats to the organization, and providing a mechanism for managing those crises that cannot be avoided. Metrolink’s CMP contains the following elements:

- Metrolink’s Definition of a Crisis

- A Differentiation of Three Crisis Types (natural, man-made, and controversial)
- A Description of Media Crisis Levels of Involvement
  - Level One (attracts media attention within seconds)
  - Level Two (attracts media attention within hours or days)
  - Level Three (attracts media attention over a period of weeks or months)
- The Establishment and Description of the Media Crisis Task Force (CMT)
- CMT Contact Information
- Crisis Management Procedures
  - On-Site Crisis Check List
  - Guidelines for Non Media Relations Spokespersons
  - Guidelines for Media Relations Spokesperson
  - Off-Site Crisis Check List
  - Guidelines for Detecting Non Incident-Related Crises
- Strategies for Managing the Message
- Employee Interview Guidelines
- General Media Crisis Policies
  - Releasing Names to Media
  - Access to Incident Site
- Media Follow-Up Guidelines
- Sample Debriefing Questions
- Customer and General Public Follow-Up Guidelines

The proactive development of the CMP would prove to be invaluable in Metrolink's crisis response. According to Gavin, "I'm glad we had it in place. It was helpful in jumpstarting things when we found out what happened, because we knew immediately who was going to what assignment, and what your scope of duties was." Once the crisis hit, Metrolink put its CMP into action. Specifically, the CMT was activated; Media Relations Advisor Gavin, CEO Solow and Board Chairman Bernson immediately went to the crash site to assess the situation and to act as spokespersons; and other CMT members, including Oaxaca, managed internal and external organizational communication at Metrolink's Los Angeles headquarters.

The most immediate and most important thing that Metrolink did was to designate Sharon Gavin as official spokesperson, who spent the entire day (and the days following) providing relevant information and engaging in media relations. Gavin also assisted in the coordination of the crisis management efforts, particularly working with

Metrolink's operations, and local and national emergency response agencies, including Los Angeles and Orange County fire and police, and with the NTSB. Other key stakeholder groups included victims' families, passengers, local hospitals, the American Red Cross, BNSF, and Metrolink employees.

### ***The Crash Site***

To better understand the dynamics involved in managing this crisis, we provide a description of the crash site, based largely on our interview with Sharon Gavin. Of course the site was chaotic—there were tons of wreckage and debris scattered about; there were hundreds of injured people, some of them receiving medical care, some of them wandering around in shock; there were media representatives, rescue workers and other officials; there were curious onlookers; and there were the dead.

When asked what it was like to manage a crisis from ground zero, Gavin replied, "It's a trip. You have to cordon off people. You have to set up a place where you can get all your work done." Far too often, crisis management prescriptions assume that the CMT will be coordinating activities in a crisis management center, far away from the media's attention, equipped with the latest communications technologies, food, water, and other essentials to get the job done. In this case, most of the crisis management efforts occurred at the scene of the disaster, with most of the efforts conducted in full view of the media and other stakeholders. There was little communication technology available, few of the comforts usually associated with a centralized crisis management center, and little opportunity to simply take a breath and get away from the scrutiny of the media. "There were people following me into the bathroom, they were EVERYWHERE I went," said Gavin. When asked what she would have done differently if she could, the first thing she said was that she would have brought better shoes. Walking around the crash site and literally stepping over dead bodies was something that, while she was psychologically prepared for it, she was not as prepared as she would have liked to have been logistically. She needed simple things that were not immediately available, like appropriate shoes, food and water, and more sophisticated communications technologies.

Two things that spokesperson Gavin had as resources that were invaluable to her were her wireless phone with text-paging and the presence of her CEO and the Director of Metrolink's Board. With her wireless phone she was able to stay in contact with Francisco Oaxaca, who was coordinating efforts through headquarters in Los Angeles.

Through this communications technology, Gavin and Oaxaca were able to maintain a dialogue about the event, providing each other with critical information. Oaxaca needed information about the crash site, and Gavin needed information coming from the members of the CMT who were at headquarters. One thing, for instance, that Gavin did not have access to was the nature of the media coverage Metrolink was receiving. Oaxaca was able to provide that. At one point, for example, Gavin got a text message from Oaxaca saying simply, "Be more compassionate." In the midst of the chaos of the crash site, Gavin had been treating several aspects of the crisis as matter-of-fact, including the numbers of injured and dead. She says that she had to distance herself somewhat from the realities of what she was experiencing so that she didn't appear too emotional in front of the cameras. In her words, "I had to pull back a lot of my own emotions . . . It was all I could do not to cry." However, this distancing resulted in her being less compassionate than she should have been. Once she got the text message from Oaxaca, she realized that she needed to open up and express the deep regret that she and Metrolink had for the victims, their families and friends.

The other resource she found invaluable was the presence of her CEO and the Director of the Board. They had regular meetings, along with people from operations and safety, every hour. These meetings provided a way for the team at the crash site to summarize what was known, exchange critical information, and discuss strategies on how to manage the crisis. According to Gavin, this provided a calm environment in which to work, even if it was just for 15 minutes each hour. According to Gavin, "it was so much calmer than everything else that was going on around us, because we knew where we were going to meet and we knew when we were going to meet. It was nice to know, 'I have this place to go.'" This calmness also allowed for more focus on the crisis because it was out of the site of the media and it was not taking place in the middle of the crash site.

### ***Crisis Communication***

In addition to the communication activities that took place at the crash site, Metrolink also sent out news releases (see Appendix B for an example), conducted news conferences, provided information hotlines, conducted a scheduled "LINK Event," and placed a "seat drop" in every seat on every train in their fleet (see Appendix C). News releases and news conferences were necessarily limited in what was said, since the NTSB investigation that began immediately precluded Metrolink from

commenting on many aspects of the crisis (particularly on the cause of the event).

An information hotline number was announced immediately for passengers' friends and families, and for other stakeholders who may have a vested interest in the incident. This highlights another effective measure that Metrolink took, outlined in the CMP, which was to provide "talking points" to hotline representatives and other Metrolink employees (see Appendix D). These talking points provided for consistent answers to frequently asked questions, thus creating an integrated crisis response. As Gavin says, "here at Metrolink we understand—everybody understands—that everybody has to work together to get the message out."

A LINK event is an event that occurs at a station, quarterly. This particular LINK event was held June 18, 19 and 20. During those three days Metrolink had representatives on five of Metrolink's evening rush hour trains. Each train had two members of the management team on board to hand out survey cards and respond to passengers' questions. Team members included: Steve Lantz, Director of Communications and Strategic Development; Ed Pederson, Manager of Safety and Security; Roger Mowrey, Manager of Operations; John Kerins, Director of Operations; Rick Hudson, Manager of Passenger Services; Mike McGinley, Director of Engineering and Construction; Bill Lydon, Director of Equipment; and Sharon Gavin. Metrolink has a standard Customer Comment card to hand out at all LINK events, with team members going through passenger cars handing these out and answering questions as they are asked.

The seat drop was part of a normal organizational communication practice of informing passengers on relevant issues, in a document called Metrolink Commuter Update. In the April 30, 2002, Update Metrolink took the opportunity to express their regret for the passengers who were killed or injured, to provide information about the crash, to reassure passengers that train travel is safe, to remind passengers that Metrolink itself has a safe history, and to thank passengers for their support.

### ***SUMMARY***

The crash that occurred on April 23, 2002, created a crisis event for Metrolink. Fortunately, Metrolink had prepared for organizational crisis and was therefore able to implement a strategic plan. Because of Metrolink's proactive approach, including the development of a CMP and CMT, training and simulations, the damage to Metrolink was con-

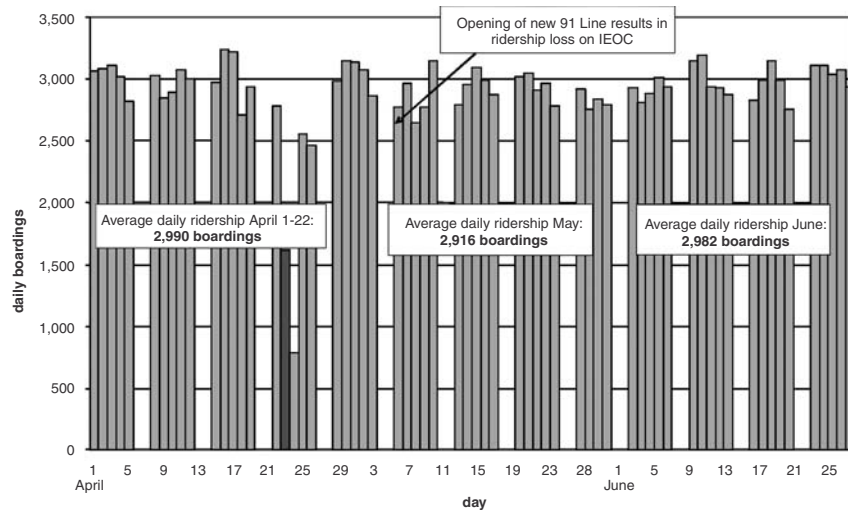
tained. Ridership returned to normal within days of the event, as Table 1 demonstrates.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This investigation has provided an in-depth analysis of one organization’s efforts to manage organizational crisis. The analysis is theory-driven, guided by three research questions derived from our review of the literature. In this section we will provide answers to those questions, based on extant data obtained from a variety of sources, including local, national, and international media, regulatory agencies such as the NTSB, and from Metrolink itself.

Recall that the first research question asked what role crisis management plans (CMPs) play in organizational crises. We believe they play a critical role, particularly in the identification of threats to the organization through risk and issues management. CMPs enable the organization to take a proactive approach to crisis, and lead to the development of the crisis communication plan and the establishment of the crisis management team (CMT). CMPs provide a structured and strategic approach to pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases.

TABLE 1. Ridership Impact of BNSF Accident



According to Gavin, the most important element of the CMP was the establishment of the CMT and the contact information provided for each member of the team. “The crisis management plan told me who I had to get out and meet first. So I had good relationships with all of these people before anything even happened,” Gavin said. “I knew who all the key people were, had their numbers with me; they all knew me.”

On the other hand, CMPs may provide a basic framework for the crisis response, but once a crisis hits, the CMP may not be as useful as some practitioners and researchers argue. In this case, while the CMP was useful in identifying the CMT, its utility beyond that was limited. When asked about the usefulness of the CMP, Gavin replied that “Our plan has a number of forms in it, like to describe an incident. Well, those pretty much go out the window in a [crisis] situation.” She argues that crisis situations are dynamic and “every situation is different and it is just sort of react when you get there.” She does, however, see the value in CMPs, particularly, as stated, in the establishment and identification of the CMT, and in risk assessment and crisis preparedness. According to Gavin, “it’s easier to react if you’ve planned at least somewhat—to do some training, to do some background information.”

Our answer to research question one then, is that the role of the CMP is to create an atmosphere of proactivity, which involves training, simulations, CMT development, and crisis communication plan creation. The utility of the CMP is particularly important in the pre-crisis phase for risk assessment and other functions, and in the post-crisis phase for evaluation. During the crisis the utility of the CMP is somewhat limited, at least in this case—it can prepare the organization for the crisis, but once a crisis hits, the CMP is used only to guide CMT behaviors through chaotic events.

Our second research question asked what the role of the CMT is in crisis situations. As is seen from above, the role of the CMT is critical. The establishment of a team of people who all know their roles during crisis events makes the management of crisis possible. Additionally, having the contact information for each team member, including their name, all phone numbers, e-mail, and fax, and knowing each team member’s role, responsibility, and area(s) of expertise is also critical for successful crisis management. “I knew exactly who to call for information on operations, who to call for safety information, who to talk to about safety history information . . . who to talk to about the size and weight of our trains and what each one of our cars weighs.” This information proved to be invaluable for Gavin during the crisis. When she

was asked a question for which she did not have an answer, she knew whom to contact to find out the information she needed.

Our answer to research question two then, is it the role of the CMT to identify key people within the organization who have expertise necessary in crisis situations, to bring those people together to create a dialogue that will ensure that communication flows between them before, during, and after crisis events, and to provide contact and other information about each member of the team so that when crisis hits, everyone knows each other and knows each other's role. It is not an exaggeration to say that organizations cannot successfully manage a crisis without first having a CMT in place.

Our final research question asked if successful crisis communication can restore consumer confidence and protect the organization's reputation. When we asked Gavin how important communication is during a crisis she said "Oh, it makes or breaks you." One interesting thing that occurred in this crisis is that while Metrolink had several members of the CMT present at the crash site, and had designated one spokesperson for the team, BNSF did not have any organizational representatives there. They would not allow it. According to Gavin, "if we hadn't been out there, like the BNSF did not allow their representative to be out there, it would have looked horrible, even though it wasn't our fault. It would look like we had something to hide. It was important for us to be out there, for us to be talking with our cities, to be talking with our Board Members, to be talking with absolutely everybody . . . because everybody's question is important to them, and every passenger is important to us."

Our answer to research question three, based upon the statements by Gavin, and based upon the fact that ridership levels were back to normal within a few days of the incident, is that yes, successful crisis communication before, during, and after a crisis event can restore consumer confidence and protect the organization's reputation.

In conclusion, based upon external evaluations by the NTSB and other regulatory agencies, news coverage of the event, Metrolink data on ridership, and our analysis of the incident, including our interview with Sharon Gavin, we believe that Metrolink provides a case study for how to successfully manage organizational crisis. As concluded by the NTSB, "The emergency response to this incident was timely, effective, and appropriate to the incident" (Railroad Accident Report, NTSB, 2003, p. 36). From these data, we will conclude the paper with a list of best practices for crisis management and crisis communication. These are:

- Organizations must take a proactive approach to crisis management by developing a Crisis Management Plan.
- The Crisis Management Team is crucial for successful crisis management.
- Support from senior management for crisis management is not just necessary, it is required.
- Training and simulation exercises are invaluable in preparation for crisis.
- Knowledge of operations by the spokesperson(s) is required so that communication with key stakeholders is facilitated.
- Not only information, but expressions of compassion are also needed in times of crisis, so that organizations experiencing crisis are perceived by stakeholders as caring, good corporate citizens.

Finally, the Metrolink crisis can be taken as an example of successful crisis management and crisis communication. This paper therefore provides an example of successful crisis management, which is necessary, since many investigations have examined what can happen when crisis management efforts are unsuccessful (e.g., Exxon, Enron, Bridgestone, etc.). Future research should continue to develop best practices for crisis management, and to continue to integrate crisis management into the larger area of strategic management.

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Received: March 31, 2004

Revised: August 16, 2005

Accepted: September 12, 2005

## APPENDIX A

**Interview of Metrolink Spokesperson Sharon Gavin**

*Q: What would you say was the most important aspect of your crisis management plan?*

Gavin: “The development of the crisis management team was definitely the most useful thing in the plan. Our plan has a number of forms in it, like to describe an incident. Well, those pretty much go out the window in a situation like that. On the other hand I knew exactly who to call for information on operations, who to call for safety information, who to talk to about safety history information, ya know, who to talk to about the size and weight of our trains and what each one of our cars weighs. So I knew who all the key people were, had their numbers with me; they all knew me.”

*Q: How important was learning the jargon of operations so that you could then translate that jargon into lay terms?*

Gavin: “At the time that the accident happened, I hadn’t even been with Metrolink for a year. But coming into transportation from a totally different field where I did public affairs, I knew that I had to learn the language if they were going to talk to me. Because the thing that I need most with people out in the field and from the operations people is for them to know that I know what I’m talking about. So they have to teach me. Fortunately they’re really patient. They were wonderful to work with and I got to know them well before this incident, which helped me at the site; it helped me afterwards because they’re all willing to work with me to educate me so that I could educate reporters.”

*Q: Did you experience any resistance from operations, given that most of the people who work in operations at Metrolink are male?*

Gavin: “I didn’t, and I didn’t for a couple reasons. Number one, yes, this is ‘guyville.’ But for 10 years I worked as a Navy public affairs officer, so I’m used to being in guyville [laughs]. And second, I could sort of relate to them on the ‘I know this is manly-man world, and I’m coming in here completely unknowledgeable, but I’m here to help you.’ And they understand that. They see the communication side of things. It’s [communication’s] really not necessary. It has nothing to do with running trains. But they understand the importance of communication with passengers, and they’re who they really care about . . . they couldn’t really care less about the media and reporters, except that they want to get things right. But they want our passengers to have the right information. And put in that context, they were more than willing to take me out to show me how things work. To sit me down and put me in classrooms and say ‘here’s how train systems work,’ and I learned a lot.”

*Q: How important was your knowledge of operations during the crisis?*

Gavin: "It was an integral part of what I do and it always has been. I've worked in a number of different fields as a communicator and I've always had to know technically what goes on. Because that what they [the media] have questions about . . . operations people are not necessarily the people you want to put in front of a microphone or that you want to put in front of a camera. It's not that they're not smart; it's that they're going to talk jargon. And also, they don't have the time or the patience for that kind of thing."

*Q: How important was the crisis management plan and the development of the crisis management team?*

Gavin: "The crisis management plan told me who I had to get out and meet first. So I had good relationships with all of these people before anything even happened. And that's where it came in most useful . . . just getting to know the people who are on the crisis management team, and learning how trains work. And there are so many different things to know as far as equipment and operations and dispatching. And they're all areas that I had gone and spent some time with in order to understand the railroad's workings. Not just for a crisis situation, but for any kind of thing."

*Q: What was it like to manage the crisis from ground zero?*

Gavin: "It's a trip. You have to cordon off people. You have to have set up a place where you can get all your work done. There were people following me into the bathroom, they were EVERYWHERE I went. And we had a yellow tape up that kept them off the scene that kept them directly away from the trains, but they were still there and they were always watching where we went . . . who we were talking to, what we were saying to that group over there. There was really no place to go where you weren't watched. And that was difficult, but not impossible to handle, because it was like, ok, every hour I would meet with our CEO, our safety guy, our operations people and we would discuss what's happening, while waiting for the NTSB to show up . . . On the scene it was easy to focus, and it was easier to focus on those things [meetings with CEO, others] because it was so much calmer than everything else that was going on around us, because we knew where we were going to meet and we knew when we were going to meet. It was nice to know, 'I have this place to go.' Yeah they were still watching, but they were 500 feet away and weren't shouting questions at that point. And it was just an information gathering session where we were recapping what's happened. And the same question that always came to me was 'What are they asking you now?' And I'd say 'Well they're asking me the same thing they've always been asking, 'how did this happen?'"

*Q: Who were the most important stakeholders, aside from the media, in the crisis?*

Gavin: "Passengers, because they were the ones who were obviously most likely to be affected by this, so we wanted to ensure that they understand that

we run as safe a system as possible, and that we are very much involved in the investigation with the NTSB, as was the BNSF and that we're all working to make sure that this doesn't happen again."

*Q: Do you think the fact that you were the "victims" of this crash may have influenced how you handled the crisis and how Metrolink was perceived?*

Gavin: "It could have, yes but the BNSF train went through a couple of signals. That was one of my questions to my boss, a couple of days afterwards, because I was the only spokesperson out there and the BNSF did not send their spokesperson out. I was on the phone with the BNSF representative, who *wanted* to be there, and the BNSF told her not to go. So I went in and I talked with Francisco Oaxaca [Manager, Metrolink External Communications] about this a couple of days later and I said, 'No matter whose fault this was, I would have been out at that site. I'm correct here.' And he said, 'Yes, you are.' Because we went out there not knowing whose fault it was, but we were going out there. So I'm sure that that affected it—the fact that our train was where it was supposed to be, when it was supposed to be there. Definitely people think you're really doing things fine. On the other hand, they still want to know, 'how could this happen?' And that's what we all want to know."

*Q: Is there anything you would have done differently, if you could have?*

Gavin: "I would have worn better shoes [laughs]. I would have brought somebody else [other than who I did bring] to the site. I took a woman, she is the fastest driver I know, but she's also our Web Manager. That was not a wise move, because I took her away from her duties. I should have taken someone from Marketing, because quite frankly, the Marketing people had nothing to do with this. I would have wanted somebody else out there to take phone messages, to gather facts for me while I'm talking with reporters . . . to just keep getting information, and to spell me for awhile. Because it was a long day. It was a long three days. I would have taken somebody who has been in a crisis situation before. That was another setback with the woman I took, was that she had never seen a crash site. And she was very, very affected by this and so she ended up being not as useful to me as I would have liked because . . . sadly in my career I've seen a lot of dead bodies. So obviously being around it and, as much as you can get used to it, and that was something that I didn't think about, 'how would somebody who has never been to a situation like this react to blood, you know, to hundreds of injured people, to walking up and stepping over a dead body.'"

*Q: Can organizations plan for a crisis successfully or do we just act when it happens?*

Gavin: "Yes and yes. You can plan for a crisis. Metrolink and other companies like this would do well in planning for a crisis to make sure that at least you have a basic overview of who does what in your organization, and in positions

like mine making sure that you get to know those people. And that's just part of planning. I made it part of my indoctrination to Metrolink because I know what's going to be expected of me. On the other hand, every situation is different and it is just sort of react when you get there. But it's easier to react if you've planned at least somewhat—to do some training, to do some background information.”

*Q: Did you try to proactively plan for an event like this?*

Gavin: “Yeah. You look at ‘what are the worst things that can happen with a train?’ And I went through them and I figured them out and that's a lot of what they did in putting together the crisis communication plan before I got here. ‘What are your worst things? ‘What's your second worst thing?’ And working backwards like that. And this crash was the worst case scenario . . . multiple injuries, multiple deaths. And a bad thing that happened shortly after Metrolink started was two young children were killed. These are horrible things and you have to think about ‘ok, what's really bad . . . what can go really, really wrong here, and how would we handle it?’”

*Q: Was it difficult convincing top management at Metrolink that crisis planning is important?*

Gavin: “That is not at all a problem here at Metrolink, because you realize, we're moving thousands of people every day. Something is going to go wrong. It's got wheels. It's moving. There are people inside. Something is going to go wrong sometime. And top management has always been big believers in providing crisis communication training for us, sending us to classes . . . taking the time to do table-top drills, looking at what might happen and how we'd all react. They understand the importance of it.”

*Q: How important is communication in a crisis situation?*

Gavin: “Oh, it makes or breaks you. And if we hadn't been out there, like the BNSF did not allow their representative to be out there, it would have looked horrible, even though it wasn't our fault. It would look like we had something to hide. It was important for us to be out there, for us to be talking with our cities, to be talking with our Board Members, to be talking with absolutely everybody . . . you know . . . strangers who called with questions, phoners who had conspiracy theories about why this happened to the train. But you talk to everybody, because everybody's question is important to them, and every passenger is important to us.”

*Q: What would you say are the “best practices” of crisis management?*

Gavin: “Teamwork, knowing who's your team. Knowing what their responsibilities are and what your responsibilities are, and how they'll work together before anything goes wrong. That's the best thing that you can do. If neces-

sary, if you have to convince top management that crisis communication is important, then you're really in a sorry state. But then that would probably be the last thing that you would want to do, is that you want to convince them that this is important; that they need to think about it and they need to be ready for it. Then you get the people who would be involved . . . and . . . practice. Table-top drills . . . bringing in an outside video crew who will just come up to people and start doing interviews like a news team will. Also, I was as open and honest as I could be. I gave the media as much information as I could give them, but a lot of our information was held back by the NTSB. I could only tell them so much . . . I could tell them what they were looking at, but I couldn't tell them how it happened, because that's what the NTSB was coming in to do, and as soon as they said they were going to be on the scene, that limited what we could say as far as the incident problem, as far as reaction to the incident . . . you know, we had to be as compassionate as possible without getting into any sort of liability issues. Because there are going to be lawsuits, and there already are."

*Q: Was it difficult being compassionate given the situation and the need to provide information to the media?*

Gavin: "When I first got to the scene the first thing I'm trying to do is gather the facts . . . the facts that I know everybody's going to ask . . . how many passengers, what was the speed, should this train be here . . . is this its normal route . . . train stuff. So I was dealing with a lot of facts, and I did not present at first, I think, the compassion that I should have shown. I was dealing with a mess and quite honestly, I had to pull back a lot of my own emotions, because I had to do a full train walk around before I faced the media, and I'm just looking at this crash scene thinking, 'Oh my God.' It was all I could do not to cry because I'm thinking as I'm looking of what's gone on in there [inside the train] and what people have gone through, and then I have to go out and face cameras and they ask me . . . I mean I can't be that way [emotional] in front of a camera, but I should have been more compassionate. I should have first said, you know, 'Our heart goes out to these people,' 'We're doing everything we can to make this situation as right as possible,' 'We've got the Red Cross here, 'We're transporting people to hospitals,' and then, 'Here are the facts.' But I did not do it in that order. And then, Francisco text paged me after seeing one of the news clips on television, and in a very simple text message wrote: 'Be more compassionate.' And that's when I realized I was making this mistake, and was able to correct that and that was great."

## APPENDIX B

**Sample News Release\******METROLINK TRAIN INVOLVED IN COLLISION  
WITH FREIGHT TRAIN IN PLACENTIA***

LOS ANGELES, CA, Wednesday April 23, 2002: Metrolink train #809 (the 7:29 a.m. Inland Empire-Orange County (IEOC) Line departure from Riverside to San Juan Capistrano) was struck by a Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) freight train in the City of Placentia at approximately 8:16 a.m. today. The incident occurred near the intersection of Richfield Avenue and Orangethorpe Avenue on tracks owned by the BNSF. The Metrolink train is one of 12 that operate on the line between San Bernardino and Riverside and Orange County. The Metrolink train was operating with its locomotive in the rear pushing the train. An estimated 265 of the over 300 passengers on board were injured with 60 transported to local hospitals. There were also two passenger fatalities.

The staff of Metrolink wishes to extend its sincere condolences to the families and loved ones of the two individuals who died in this morning's train accident.

"This tragedy is the first of its kind on the Metrolink system," Metrolink Board Chairman and Los Angeles City Councilman Hal Bernson said. "We feel as if we have lost two members of the Metrolink family and our prayers go out to their friends and loved ones."

We also wish to extend our help and concern to our passengers who were injured. Friends, family and loved ones who are interested in information about passengers that were involved in the incident with the freight train this morning in Placentia can call Metrolink's customer service line at (800) 371-LINK. Operators will be on hand until 10:00 p.m. Our customer service center will reopen at 6:00 a.m. tomorrow.

Metrolink train 327 (traveling from San Bernardino 6:13 p.m. to Los Angeles--arriving 7:50 p.m.) has been annulled today. Passengers can take Train # 329 Leaving San Bernardino @ 7:20 p.m.--arriving downtown Los Angeles @ 8:45 p.m.

The National Transportation Safety Board has taken over the incident scene. Their strike team is expected to arrive at the site about 6:00 p.m. tonight. Metrolink and BNSF will not be able to clear the incident scene until the NTSB authorizes. We believe it will take 2-5 hours to place the tracks back in service once the work can begin. While the cause of the accident is not known at this time, Metrolink will cooperate fully with the National Transportation Safety Board and do everything in our power to assist authorities with determining the cause of the accident.

We will provide you with updates as soon as we have any additional information to share. We will issue an advisory to confirm the date and time of our next update with you.

For this afternoon, IEOC passengers will be able to take the train to the Orange Station and transfer to buses to complete their journey between the Orange Station and the San Bernardino Station. Orange County Line trains are not affected by the incident and will run on their regular schedule. We are also arranging for buses to run between San Bernardino and Orange County during the morning tomorrow, if the track remains closed.

*\*Please note that at the time of this news release, only two people had died. Another person died later from injuries sustained in the crash.*

## APPENDIX C

### “Seat Drop”

#### ***METROLINK COMMUTER UPDATE***

April 30, 2002

Dear Metrolink Passenger:

Last Tuesday, the Metrolink family lost two of its members in the collision between Inland Empire-Orange Country train #809 and a Burlington Northern Santa Fe freight train in Placentia. That morning, Robert Kube and Lawrence Irvin Sorenson were enjoying their regular train ride as they had done many times before. At 8:10 a.m., the world changed suddenly and violently for them and the over 300 passengers and crew. In seconds, over 260 of our passengers were injured and Mr. Kube and Mr. Sorenson had sustained injuries that ultimately led to their deaths. Metrolink’s Board of Directors, led by Chairman and Los Angeles City Councilmember Hal Bernson, Chief Executive Office David Solow and his staff extend their condolences to the Kube and Sorenson families over their losses. Our hearts go out to everyone who had a loved one aboard the Metrolink train #809 and we will continue to keep them in our thoughts and prayers during this difficult time. During the coming days and weeks, our first priority will be to provide the best possible assistance to those involved in the incident and their families and loved ones.

We want to reassure our passengers that train travel remains the safest form of transit in the country—safer than travel by commercial airliner or automobile. Metrolink is proud of our record of providing safe, reliable and comfortable commuter train service to over 30,000 commuters daily and over 50

million passenger trips in nearly 10 years. Tuesday's incident resulted in the first fatalities on a Metrolink train in our history. We also understand if you are feeling slightly uncomfortable as you board your train today after having seen photos of last Tuesday's incident, wondering if that could be your train next. Collisions between trains, especially of the head-on variety are extremely rare (occurring in less than .5% train collisions since 1992). Metrolink's passenger cars are manufactured to the highest standards to withstand collisions. We can also assure you that Metrolink is in the forefront of the use of emerging technologies to make the operation of all trains as safe as possible. The Metrolink system is equipped with the latest proven technology designed to prevent collisions such as the one that occurred last week.

Finally, we would like to thank our passengers for their support during this difficult week. Riders from other lines have called to offer support. Passengers on the Inland Empire-Orange County Line have told countless stories of how riding the train has improved their lifestyle and introduced them to friends they might not have met otherwise. What has been confirmed is what we at Metrolink have felt all along—our riders are part of a community, the Metrolink family. What has also been revealed is that tragic incidents such as last Tuesday's can bring us closer. Take the time to get to know your train "buddies" a little better, get their last name and get a home or cell phone number. In spite of our losses, we are convinced that the Metrolink family will be stronger than ever.

Thank you for riding Metrolink.

For Metrolink information call (800) 371-LINK or visit [www.metrolinktrains.com](http://www.metrolinktrains.com).

## APPENDIX D

## Talking Points for Hotline Representatives

*Q&A ON SAFETY****1. With the accident in April—and the one the week before with Amtrak—is train travel safe?***

Yes, trains are an extremely safe way to travel. In fact, according to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), “rail is still the safest way to travel on the ground.”

Last year (2001) only three passengers on trains were killed. By comparison, more than 40,000 people traveling in motor vehicles are killed each year.

The passenger deaths that resulted from the accident on April 23 were the first among Metrolink passengers in our 10-year history.

***2. Will Metrolink be changing any of its operations as a result of last week’s accident?***

We are still working with the National Transportation Safety Board on the investigation into the April 23 crash; at this time there are no plans to change our operations.

It is important to keep in mind that this is the first incident where Metrolink passengers were killed. It was an event that affected us all. The safety of our passengers and crewmembers is our top priority and we do everything we can to ensure their safety.

Collisions between trains, especially of the head-on variety are extremely rare (occurring in less than .5% of train collisions since 1992). Metrolink’s passenger cars are manufactured to the highest standards to withstand collisions. We can also assure you that Metrolink is in the forefront of the use of emerging technologies to make the operation of all trains as safe as possible.

***3. Will Metrolink develop a GPS or radio-based “anti-collision” system, which will detect trains on the same track and apply brakes automatically to stop the trains?***

As far as “radio-based anti-collision” systems go, there are currently a number of Communications-Based Train Control (CBTC) systems being tested in North America. These systems involve the application of digital data communications, automatic positioning systems, wayside interface units (to communicate with switches and wayside detectors), on-board and control center computers, and other advanced display, sensor, and control technologies to manage and control railroad operations.

Among the goals of CBTC projects: improving safety, and increasing track capacity.

Two things that have hindered the development of these projects so far are developing the standards and the technology for a system that can work with

both freight and passenger train operations, and cost. The estimated cost for a nationwide CBTC system for both freight and passenger rail is more than \$2 billion. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is working with the Association of American Railroads (AAR) to develop a cost-effective communications-based train control system at the AAR's Transportation Technology Center, in Pueblo, Colorado.

**4. Will Metrolink continue to use the cab forward configuration on its trains?**

Yes. The cab cars that Metrolink uses meet all the current safety standards. We are in the process of negotiating for the purchase of additional cab cars and those cars will meet the latest federal structural standards.

**5. What about seat belts on the train cars? Will Metrolink be adding those?**

The use of seat belts is not required for trains, and there are no passenger railroads that use seatbelts. Seat belts are required in cars because cars are designed to stop very quickly, and there are many situations that require them to be able to do that. Trains are not designed to stop suddenly and, because of the number of safety systems built into rail systems, there are very few occasions where that would be necessary.

**6. Does Metrolink plan to remove the tables from its cars?**

No.

**7. The NTSB has been calling for some sort of automatic braking system or Positive Train Control for a number of years. Why doesn't Metrolink have this? Will you be getting it in the future?**

Metrolink is working with the other railroads and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to develop and test this technology.

Positive Train Control systems currently being tested still have a number of technical hurdles to overcome. These systems are satellite based and there are issues about interruptions of signals, the possibility of outsiders tampering with signals, etc. Another concern is the ability of a system to work nationwide, with both passenger and freight trains traveling across multiple rail lines with separate dispatching systems.

**8. When will the NTSB come out with its final determination about what happened in this crash?**

The NTSB will issue its results in approximately 9 to 12 months.

**9. What kind of train control systems are there on the tracks Metrolink's trains run on? Are these systems outdated?**

Train control systems are designed to provide two things: safe train movements, and efficient train movements. While these systems have evolved over the years, the basic principles consist of determining where a train is and preventing conflicting train movements. Historically this has been done through the use of what are called track circuits.

Some say that track circuits are ancient technology, since they have been in use since the 1870's. (Bill Petit, who chairs the Train Control Technology

Committee of the Railway Progress Institute, says this is “akin to defining electricity as obsolete because it’s been around for centuries.”) While the track circuit concept of train control has been around for many years, it has evolved substantially—from a system that used mechanical rods to today’s microprocessor-based systems, which can detect a variety of problems.

The track circuit train control systems used throughout the country today use what is known as a “block” system. In a block system, a “block” is the length of track between signals.

The signals of the track are what tell the locomotive engineers what to do. The different colored aspects, or lights, on the signals indicate what actions the engineer should take—green for clear or proceed, yellow for prepare to stop, red for stop, etc. Different combinations of these aspects also let the engineer know what’s ahead—like if there’s a speed restriction or diverging route.

With a block system there is only supposed to be one train within a block at a time. So when a train passes a signal, entering a new block, the aspect on signal the train has just passed turns red—to indicate that no other train should enter that block. Also, the signals leading up to the (now) red signal would change to let another engineer know that they will be stopping ahead.

The signals on a block system activate automatically to keep the trains a safe distance apart. While a number of newer, automated train control systems are currently being tested, they are based on the same basic safety principles of providing a safe envelope.

***10. Isn’t it time that the SCRRA built its own tracks? Not to share with freight trains, but for passenger use only?***

Metrolink operates its commuter trains over 439 miles of track throughout the counties we serve. Of these, the SCRRA member agencies own 303 track miles. While, certainly, we would like to have tracks specifically for our own use, that is not feasible at this time. What *is* possible, and necessary, is for Metrolink to work closely with the freight railroads on the corridors we share to ensure safe and efficient operations for everyone.