

What Would You Do If...?

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No matter how carefully you've planned and prepared for your meeting, inevitably, things happen. Flight attendants decide to go on strike. An attendee passes out on the dance floor. The hotel double-books a breakout room. More people than expected turn out for a food function. "Crises" like these take place all the time...and you have to be prepared to handle them.

Obviously, you have no control over whether a tornado touches down or a fire breaks out in the hotel. But you *can* avoid many other crises simply by being well prepared.

Consider the following guidelines:

- Anticipate challenges and plan accordingly.
- Visualize every aspect of your program from an attendee and staff perspective.
- Communicate well and often.
- Review facility and supplier specifications.

If, despite your best efforts, a difficult situation *does* arise, remember to solve the problem first, then ask questions. If three gallons of coffee instead of the 30 you ordered arrive at a break, for example, focus on getting 27 additional gallons out of the kitchen quickly rather than "who's to blame." Once the situation is under control, go back and determine exactly what happened so that it doesn't happen again.

To help you hone your crisis management skills, we've come up with 10 realistic meeting-related crises. What would you do in each of these scenarios?

Medical Emergency

An attendee has an apparent heart attack in the ballroom foyer just before your opening general session.

What do you do? Immediately contact hotel security and/or the facility's designated emergency contact. Tell them what happened and where, and instruct them to call 911 as

well as the in-house paramedics if applicable. (Do *not* call 911 yourself unless that is the preferred procedure of the facility. The facility's security personnel are much better equipped to meet medical personnel and escort them to the site.) If the attendee stops breathing before help arrives, ask if there's a medical professional in the crowd to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) or perform the procedure yourself if you are certified.

Meanwhile, direct staff members to block off the main entrance to the ballroom and move attendees out of the foyer and into the general session through another door. If there's only one entrance, you'll have to delay the general session until the area is clear.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? If you weren't prepared, this crisis could have been a tragedy. No one can predict a heart attack. The best you can do is take the following steps before any event:

1. Review the facility's emergency procedures.
2. Obtain important contact numbers and provide them to all of your staff members. Many groups also include emergency numbers in their program.
3. Be sure your staff is trained in CPR.

Not Enough Room at the Inn

At 2 p.m., your headquarters hotel tells you that it is oversold and will be relocating 40 of your attendees to a nearby (15 minutes away) comparable (minus a star or two) hotel for one night.

What do you do? Since this scenario is not a rare occurrence, every meeting professional should take the following precautions:

1. Require the hotel to give you as much advance warning as possible about the potential relocation, or walking, of any attendees.

2. Include a relocation clause in your contract stating that, in the event a guest is relocated either voluntarily or involuntarily, the guest will receive:

a. a complimentary room at the new hotel for *every night* that the attendee cannot be accommodated at the original hotel;

b. a complimentary five-minute phone call to let others know of the change;

c. complimentary transportation (or the cost of transportation) between the new hotel and the headquarters hotel until the guest can be accommodated at the headquarters hotel;

d. upgraded accommodations when the delegate returns to the original hotel;

e. an in-room amenity upon return; and

f. a letter of apology to the guest in which the hotel accepts responsibility for the overbooking situation.

The purpose of including these concessions is to persuade people to “want” to move to another hotel, which is always the best way to handle the situation.

3. Find out which properties are traditionally used as “overflow hotels” for relocated guests so you can rule out those that don’t meet your standards. If the city is sold out, however, you may not have that option.

On site, ask the hotel to move other guests (i.e., transients or delegates from other groups) before moving *your* guests. If your contract includes a relocation clause outlining the above concessions, the hotel will be more likely to relocate guests whose contracts don’t include such a clause.

You also have the option of relocating or doubling up staff members to free up additional rooms. (Don’t even think about doubling up your board members or asking top executives to share a room.)

Another alternative is to discuss with the hotel the possibility of offering voluntary relocation incentives to earlier-arriving guests checking in at the front desk. The package could include the items outlined above, a cash incentive, or a future complimentary stay at the hotel or an affiliated property.

If relocating attendees is inevitable, then this next step is imperative. Examine the list of guests who have not yet arrived and compile a list of those who absolutely *cannot* be relocated (such as VIPs and speakers) under any circumstances.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You *should* have been tracking your room pickup on a weekly basis starting at four months out (or more) and kept in close

contact with the hotel. Had you done so, you and the hotel most likely would not have been surprised at the eleventh hour. The property still may have been forced to walk delegates, but perhaps you could have given them several weeks’ notice.

You also should have provided the property with several years of no-show and cancellation history, if possible, to help management make a more accurate decision on over-selling. And don’t forget to always include a relocation clause in your contract with the property addressing all of the issues outlined above.

Potential Protest

You’ve heard that a local group opposes your keynote speaker and plans to protest in front of the hotel during your opening general session.

What do you do? Inform the hotel or convention center about the potential situation as soon as you know it exists. Discuss the issue thoroughly with property management, including the head of security, and together come up with a detailed plan. (Do *not* settle for assurances from the facility along the lines of “We’ve got everything covered.”)

Notify the local police and request that officers be on site, both inside and outside the property, in uniform and plain clothes. Arrange for in-house security to be on site, too. Alert your staff and have all facility department heads alert their staff members, too. Advise the speaker to use an entrance that allows him to bypass public areas of the property. And inform your attendees so that they won’t be surprised.

On the day of the opening session, post association staff at all entrances to the ballroom and instruct them to check for attendee name badges and refuse admission to anyone without a badge. Instruct security to remove hecklers or protesters during the session (after one of your staff members confirms that they are not part of your group) only if they become an annoyance or safety hazard. If necessary, arrange for the speaker to exit the ballroom and facility via “back-of-the-house” routes to a waiting car.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You must always consider this possibility when selecting a controversial speaker. Be sure to notify top executives about the potential problem so that they can be part of the solution.

A Blown Guarantee

You guaranteed 60 for your committee lunch; 55 are already in the room and it looks like another 15 are on the way. The room is set for 64.

What do you do? Alert the banquet captain and kitchen as soon as you realize you’re running out of seats. Ask staff members not to sit down until everyone else is seated. Try

to add chairs to existing tables in an effort to accommodate the higher number of guests.

If this strategy doesn't provide enough seating, instruct the banquet staff to set up additional tables with chairs and linens only. (Don't create extra work for the servers by adding tableware until you know that you absolutely need those tables.) If at all possible, this should be done in the back of the house. Rolling tables into a room should be a last resort.

If the room becomes overly full and attendees are still arriving, consider sending them to the in-house restaurant and arranging with the hotel to post their charges to the master account.

Meanwhile, ask the banquet captain or chef if there's enough food from the pre-arranged menu to serve all of the guests in the function room. If there isn't, instruct the banquet staff to serve the different meal to entire tables at the back of the room. And be sure that everyone at the table is eating that same replacement meal. (This ensures that a delegate eating chicken is not sitting next to a delegate eating pasta.)

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? If you tracked the guarantee history of all your food and beverage functions from previous years, you may have discovered that this particular committee lunch tends to attract a greater number of attendees, especially if there are hot agenda items to be discussed. You also could have checked the in-house list the day before the event, or at least on the morning of the event, in an effort to determine the size of the potential audience.

Meeting Room Double-Booked

The hotel tells you at 5 p.m. that the room blocked for your committee meeting tomorrow at 7 a.m. is actually being used by another group. You need to move to another room.

What do you do? Find out the name of the other group and when they booked. If your organization was booked and blocked first, or your group represents a substantially larger piece of business, you may be able to persuade the hotel to relocate the other group instead. If you *must* move, make sure that the room you're being moved to is adequate in size and facilities. If the original room had the permanent screen and white board you needed and the new room doesn't, for example, the property will have to provide replacement audio-visual equipment.

The facility should call all of the attendees in their guest rooms and notify them of the room change or slip a message under their doors if they're all staying in the headquarters hotel. Also arrange for the hotel to place signage directing delegates to the new location in the registration area and

any other high-traffic areas, as well as outside the original meeting room and outside the new meeting room. In addition, both the group and the facility should station staff members in strategic areas to assist attendees with directions.

Require the hotel to facilitate all logistics and absorb all costs associated with the room change, such as signage and audio-visual equipment. It also may be appropriate to ask for additional monetary compensation or concessions, such as a complimentary coffee break, for the inconvenience and confusion that such a situation can create. If you choose to do so, ask for these concessions while on site (never after you return home) and be reasonable.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? Ideally, the specific room should have been listed in your contract. (For many good reasons, hotels typically will not specify exact meeting rooms more than a year in advance of the meeting.) Double-booking situations usually occur when the facility has not communicated with you fully. It's also essential to review the hotel résumé and banquet event orders prior to the opening day of your convention. Discrepancies may be caught when reviewing this paperwork, thereby avoiding potential problems after the meeting has started.

Overflowing Session Rooms

You're running 15 concurrent sessions and one that is about to begin has 150 people instead of the expected 80. Room is set to max.

What do you do? If an adjoining room isn't being used, open the airwall between the two rooms. If a session in an adjoining room has a low turnout, move that session to a smaller room and open the airwall between the two rooms. If your general session room is unoccupied, relocate the entire overflowing session. If a nearby room has more space, but a low turnout, work with the speakers to change rooms (be sure that the AV needs of the speakers can still be accommodated). If none of these options is possible, offer to repeat the session later in the day or later in the conference.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You *should* have required delegates to preregister for specific sessions, which would have given you far more control over the number of people in each room. It's also important to carefully examine the agenda as well as past history and ensure that hot industry topics and the most popular speakers are booked in the largest rooms.

I'm Hungry!

The hotel is running 30 minutes late in setting up your dinner in the grand ballroom, which follows a reception in the foyer.

What do you do? Find out exactly *why* they're going to

be late. If the banquet staff is pre-setting salads, for example, have them serve the salads instead and start the banquet on time. Otherwise, keep the bars at the reception open until the room is ready and arrange for the hotel to pay a portion of the liquor bill to reflect the extra time that the bars remained open. Ask the banquet captain to quickly bring out some type of food — even dry snacks — to appease your possibly annoyed guests. In addition, if you have entertainment ask the hotel to pay for the band to play for an extra 30 minutes.

Traffic Problems

Your general session of 2,000 breaks and everyone needs to head downstairs for lunch. There is a long line of people waiting to get onto the escalator.

What do you do? Have the facility hold a few elevators to move your guests and either turn the escalators off (so your delegates can walk down them) or arrange it so that they're all going in a downward direction. Station staff members at the top of the escalators to direct delegates to the area that is moving the fastest.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? Anticipating the mass exodus from the general session and the location of the lunch, you should have instructed staff members to perform the above tasks *before* the end of the general session. Alternatively, you could have tried to hold the lunch on the same floor as the general session.

Liability on the Horizon

You blocked 500 rooms at a hotel and signed an attrition clause that makes your organization liable for 80 percent of the contracted block. Twenty-one days prior to arrival, you are on target for meeting registrants, but you are only half way there on your room block.

What do you do? Compare your registration list with the hotel's entire housing list. (Be sure you have negotiated this privilege in your contract.) Contact attendees whose names do not appear on the housing list to find out if they've made a reservation yet or to confirm if they've booked rooms at another hotel. It's very possible that some of your guests have not been correctly coded to your group and will not show up on the list from the hotel. If complimentary rooms and suites are tied to the pickup of the block, give staff members their own rooms to help you reach your quota.

If there's no way you're going to reach the 80 percent mark, negotiate with the hotel. Offer to move an off-site event in-house, for example, as a means of compensating the property for its lost revenue. Or offer to book a future meeting there if the property agrees to drop the fees. If all else fails, and it looks like you'll need to pay attrition fees, ask the

hotel if you could allocate the funds to upgraded food and beverage so that delegates get more for their money.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You *should* have been tracking your room pickup on a weekly basis starting at six months out and kept in close contact with the hotel. When you noticed a shortfall, you should have immediately worked with the hotel to release some rooms for resale. (The attrition clause in your contract may have allowed limited reductions to the block at six months and three months out.) By tracking your pickup, you no doubt would have realized that the numbers weren't materializing. Then you could have stepped up your marketing efforts in an attempt to boost attendance and/or released some of the rooms from the block.

Wheelchair Bound

One of your attendees calls a week before arrival to tell you that she is wheelchair-bound and is staying at one of the hotels on the shuttle route.

What do you do? The easiest solution is to move the guest to the headquarters hotel where most events are occurring or close to the convention center (if applicable) so that she doesn't have to use the shuttle system. If that's not possible, ask the attendee if she actually needs special transportation. If she's traveling with a companion, for example, she may not require access to a wheelchair-accessible vehicle and may agree to be reimbursed for taxis to and from the event areas.

If she *does* require special transportation, arrange for a wheelchair-accessible vehicle to serve that particular hotel on the shuttle route. Double check with the transportation company to ensure that the bus matches the schedule of the guest needing this assistance. (Note: Many bus companies do not have full-size accessible buses, so you may either have to replace one of the full-size buses in the shuttle fleet with an accessible mini-bus or add a mini-bus to the existing fleet of buses serving the shuttle routes.)

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You *should* have included a line on the registration form asking participants if they have any "additional requirements" and requesting that any special needs be submitted by a certain date (perhaps three weeks prior to the start of the meeting). Reviewing the previous year's registration list for any notations of attendees with special requirements and then cross checking those names with the current registration list is also helpful. In addition, you could have added a wheelchair-accessible mini-bus to the fleet ... just in case.

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