

Chapter 1: The First Ninety Minutes

The fire had started sometime after four in the morning, in a junction box behind the east dock's conveyor line. By the time the overnight crew smelled smoke, it had already worked its way into the insulation above the ceiling tiles. The sprinklers caught it before it reached the main floor. That fact — sprinklers worked, fire contained to one section, no spread to the main warehouse — would turn out to be one of the few pieces of good news Claire had all morning, and she did not know it yet when she parked her car.

What she knew, standing on the asphalt in the gray half-light, was smaller and messier: smoke, still visible near the roofline. Three fire trucks. Forty-some employees clustered near the grass, some in the parking lot's floodlights, some in the dark past their reach. And Deion Marsh, the facilities lead, walking toward her fast with the particular look of a person who has bad news and no idea yet how bad it actually is.

"One person went to the hospital," Deion said, before she'd even reached him.

"Contractor, dock crew. Marcus. Smoke, and I think a burn on his arm. The ambulance already left."

"Is he — " Claire started.

"Conscious. Talking. That's what the EMTs said. I don't know more than that."

She wrote it down. Not literally — she had no notebook, no pen, nothing but a phone with 4 percent battery she'd forgotten to charge — but she made herself hold the two facts apart in her mind with as much discipline as if she had written them on two separate index cards: Marcus was conscious and talking when the ambulance left. I do not know his condition now. Those are not the same sentence, and the difference between them would matter more than she expected in the hours ahead.

This is the first and least glamorous skill this book will ask you to build: the ability, in the first minutes of a crisis, to resist turning a partial fact into a finished story. Claire wanted very badly to know that Marcus was fine. Wanting it made it tempting to say it. She did not say it, because she did not know it, and one lesson she had learned the hard way in three years of leading people is that

a leader's words carry a kind of borrowed certainty. If Claire said "he's fine," forty tired, frightened employees would treat that as verified fact, not hope. She was not willing to spend her credibility on a guess, even a kind one.

The first ninety minutes of most crises look nothing like a crisis-communication seminar. There is no conference room, no prepared statement, no calm voice reading from a script. There is a parking lot, or a hallway, or a phone screen lighting up with six missed calls. Information does not arrive in order. It arrives in fragments, from people who are themselves frightened, exhausted, or simply wrong. A crew member tells you a coworker "went down." Someone else says they saw them walking. Both people are telling you the truth as they understood it in a chaotic moment, and both accounts might be incomplete or slightly off.

Your job in those first ninety minutes is not to have all the answers. Almost no leader does, and audiences — employees, customers, even journalists — generally know that. Your job is to establish two things quickly: that you are present and paying attention, and that you will not say

things you have not verified. Those two things, together, are what people are actually listening for in the earliest moments of a crisis, even more than the details of what happened.

Claire's first real decision of the day was not what to say. It was who to call, and in what order. She called Priya, her VP, because Priya needed to hear it from Claire before she heard it from anyone else, and because Claire needed her authority to make three decisions in the next hour that were above her normal pay grade — evacuating the rest of the building as a precaution, sending the overnight crew home rather than holding them for a debrief nobody was ready to run, and closing the center for the day rather than trying to salvage a partial shift. Priya picked up on the second ring. She listened for eleven seconds without interrupting, which Claire would later say was the most useful thing her boss did all week.

"Do what you need to do to keep everyone safe," Priya said. "I'll be there in forty minutes. Don't talk to press. Don't post anything yet. Just take care of the people in front of you."

That last sentence became, without either of them planning it, the organizing rule for Claire's entire morning: take care of the people in front of you first, with words that are true, even when true means "I don't know yet."
