

## **Crisis Communications Planning**

Crisis - Any situation that threatens the safety, the integrity, reputation or funding of your organization and its business.

If a crisis happens tomorrow, do you know what your crisis response plan is? Do you have a crisis response team with roles and job descriptions? If key personnel are away, can you track them down?

The purpose of a crisis communication plan is to give us a proactive, specific plan to follow during a crisis. A realistic crisis management plan doesn't have the answer to every question. It just fills the gap between how our brains work normally and how they work during a crisis. Once the crisis hits, it's too late to start deciding who's in charge of what.

### **Do You Really Need A Crisis Communication Plan?**

Remember the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska? This was a textbook example of how not to manage a crisis. The company was slow to respond, its leadership was invisible, it limited communication and offered up no credible spokespersons. The result was one of perceived arrogance and permanent image damage. More than a decade later the Exxon name remains linked to "Valdez."

A crisis plan allows you to lower your vulnerability and create strategies to deal with a full range of problems you might encounter. An effective crisis plan moves you from a reactionary mode to one taking proactive steps that aid in agency and community healing and puts you back in relative control. With a proper plan, your organization will show full transparency and establish communication channels capable of reaching critical audiences quickly. By planning ahead, those crucial networks and relationships you need during a crisis will already be built before a crisis strikes.

Manage issues before they manage you. If you choose to ignore a potentially bad issue, odds are it will not go away. Better to constantly scan the environment, anticipate the bad stuff, and tell the senior managers—and when you do, have action steps and key messages already formulated.

### **Before The Crisis**

Step 1 - Create a list of possible crises that could affect your organization.

This list ranks your crises, with the most damaging and/or most likely to occur at the top. Distinguish between these categories:

- Natural disasters - tornadoes, floods, fires, etc.
- Normal accidents - injuries such as falls, heart attacks, etc.
- Deliberate evil actions - bombings, kidnappings, and cyber attacks

- Budget cuts from funding sources, grant funding cuts, layoffs, etc.
- Controversial sponsorship or programming
- Loss of key personnel or leaders
- Difficulties due to improper behavior or religious, sexual, political, ethnic issues
- Failure to comply with legal obligations

Step 2 - Select three or four highest ranking crises and consider the following:

- Look for warning signs for that particular crisis
- Develop a response to media questions about the situation
- Determine immediate steps you would take to minimize damage
- Create key messages

Step 3 - Create a Crisis Team

- Depending on the size of your agency, select four to six people who are decision makers in the organization (For a non-profit, the manager of the team would likely be a board chair and/or the executive director; for a corporation, the director of public relations or communications)
- Get their contact information (don't forget personal cell phones)
- Assign duties and chain of command

Step 4 - Select a media spokesperson

- This person will handle all media relations during the crisis. It's best to only have one spokesperson during a crisis; this ensures consistency and reduces confusion.
- Perform spokesperson training
- Establish communications protocols such as information disclosure guidelines and approval procedures

Step 5 - Identify your target audiences/ stakeholders - internal and external

- Have contact info of employees, board members, etc.
- Communicate with internal audience first
- Develop communication methods, strategies and tactics for each audience

Step 6 - Create pre-prepared materials

- Approved "fact" sheets, with background information and photos
- Key messages the organization would like to focus on.
- Bios and backgrounders of key people in your organization
- Sample news releases
- Documentation forms and procedures
- Identify or set up alternate work sites

## **During A Crisis**

Step 1 - First Alert

- Calmly alert your Executive Director, Board Chair, Senior Management and Crisis Team. Your PR Professional must be brought into the discussion at the same time senior management learns of the crisis and before the media gets wind of the crisis.
- Inform employees on site that all calls be passed to designated spokesperson

Step Two - Assess Situation Quickly

- Collect All of the Facts
- Begin to fill out incident fact sheet - date, time, sources, etc.

Step Three - Inform Key Groups/Constituents

- Internal audiences are critical - Inform staff first
- Continue to communicate with these audiences on a regular basis

Step Four - Create Action Plan/Prepare for Media Calls or Visits

- Find the plan
- Keep a list of resources handy
- Develop talking points
- Start media contact record sheet - Keep a list of media and who talked to them (date, their outlet, name, town, phone, e-mail, etc.)
- Designate media spokesperson
- Anticipate media questions
- Assemble important background literature
- Put public information on your own web site

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If necessary:

- Discuss media inquiry coordination with civil authorities involved
- Set up a separate media room
- Designate separate telephone lines for incoming and outgoing calls
- Consider using a free phone number with pre-recorded message with latest factual message

#### Step Five - When Reporters Arrive

- Do not speculate – stick to what you know and stay true to the facts. Don't even guess.
- **DO NOT GIVE OUT INFORMATION RE: DEATHS, INJURIES AND NAMES, ADDRESSES OF VICTIMS** – See Hippa laws at [www.hippa.org](http://www.hippa.org).
- Advise them of time and place for future updates
- If necessary, issue safety/protective equipment and escort to media room
- Inform reporters of any restrictions on movement or photos

### After The Crisis

#### Step 1 – Debrief

Ask everyone involved in the response effort the following questions. Document the responses and use the knowledge to prepare for the next crisis

- What went well?
- What didn't go so well?
- What will we do differently next time?

#### Step 2 – Recognition

Provide recognition both informally during the crisis and more formally after it's over. Don't forget to include those who didn't get to work on the direct response—the ones who “kept the home fires burning”—and anyone from outside the organization who contributed to the crisis response.

#### Step 3 - Celebrate Success

At some appropriate time after the crisis ends, let your people celebrate their hard work. If you've done a good job and weathered the storm, there's a good chance your public profile

will be better than it was before the crisis. If so, capitalize on it! Follow up with key audiences after the crisis ends—but not too much later.

#### Step 4 – Expect Media Follow-ups

If your crisis had a high profile, expect that media will do follow-up stories in the future especially on milestone dates (six months later, one year later, five years, etc.)

### Advice For The Spokesperson

Be available. Conduct regular media briefings until it's over. Tell the media how much time has been allotted and stick to it. You are in control. Start with a prepared statement. Use plain language, no jargon.

Answer each question with a positive, stand alone statement. Don't be defensive or try to debate. This is a message delivery environment you're in, not a conversation. Every sentence out of your mouth has the potential of becoming a sound bite (quote). Make it count.

Listen carefully to the question for a word or phrase that you can use in your answer. This puts you in a clearly responsive posture. You are answering the question, but on your terms. You have that right!

Keep your ego out of it. The reporter might try to tweak you to get a response that you otherwise wouldn't want to give.

Keep your focus on your target audiences. In the final analysis, they are who you need to persuade and convince. Not the reporter.

Say “I don't know” if you don't have all the answers. You do have to be willing to say you don't know when, in fact, you don't know.

Talk about what you are doing, not what you're not doing. “We have detailed procedures to deal with this event and have trained our employees...”

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There is no such thing as "off the record."

"No comment" is a dangerous phrase. A reporter typically hears that you're hiding something. "No comment" has the potential of turning up the emotional temperature and triggering a downward spiral toward disaster.

There are questions you legitimately may not be able to answer. Reporters usually can accept the reason why, whether it's a personnel matter, a competitive issue, a matter in litigation, or, in the case of a public company, an SEC prohibition. Certainly, there may be other reasons, just as legitimate. All you have to do is say so. And use language that is positive and helpful.

### How To Make A Crisis Worse

- Play ostrich.
- Start work on a potential crisis situation after its public.
- Treat the media like the enemy.
- Get stuck in reaction mode vs. being proactive.
- Use language your audience doesn't understand.
- Address only issues and ignore feelings.
- Make only written statements.
- Do the same thing over and over and over again expecting different results.

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