

The Crisis Communications Challenge: Are YOU Prepared?

Somewhere in your organization, there's a crisis waiting to happen...

No organization—big, small, for-profit, not-for-profit, public, or private—is crisis-proof. Regardless of whether you believe it, there is a crisis in your future... perhaps tomorrow, possibly next week or next year, or perhaps not for several years... but it's lurking there. The only real uncertainty is whether you'll be ready for it and can prevent it from becoming a full-scale disaster.

What will that crisis look like? What form will it take? From an "Act of God" like a flood or an earthquake, to an internal financial crisis (think Enron), to a terrorist attack, the possibilities are almost endless. You could experience a hostile takeover, a regulatory shutdown, the sudden death of your CEO, a scandal at the Board level, a letter bomb, product liability issues, misuse of confidential information, an employee error, or any number of other crises.

Creating a plan for an intangible or unforeseen crisis is a bit like remembering your umbrella while the sun is out; it seems kind of silly, so you leave it home. The risk of getting drenched by rain is miniscule, however, compared to the consequences of having to face a crisis totally unprepared. Sometimes you'll

have warning that something is going to happen, sometimes not. But you can and should plan for the unlikely (and the unthinkable), and your planning often can help mitigate or possibly avert some crises.

Every crisis must be managed, because effective crisis management helps preserve a business's credibility, reputation, and value. Crisis communications, which manages the public perception of your organization, is a critical component of crisis management. This article presumes the existence of a crisis management plan. It looks only at the crisis communications process (planning, implementation, evaluation), offering executives and communicators alike a glimpse into what crisis communications is and how to make it work for your organization.

“When written in Chinese the word crisis is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.”

*~ John F. Kennedy,
in an April 1959 Speech*

Crisis Communication Planning: Prepare vs. React

There are two possible ways to handle crisis communications: on the fly or according to plan. In the first case, you're in reactive mode and probably not able to gain control of what's going on, plus you're more vulnerable to making mistakes, saying the wrong thing, and blundering in more ways than you want to think about. A planned approach to crisis communication limits the number of decisions you must make in crisis mode and gives you the tools you need to get right on top of things—and maintain control. The truth of the matter is that the

longer you take to respond to crisis, the greater the likelihood that your organization will suffer some kind of damage to its reputation, credibility, and/or value.

While the very nature of a crisis indicates something unplanned, and while you can't predict when or how a crisis may occur, you can take many steps now to prepare you to respond to the unpredictable. For example, a crisis often grows out of a situation that people in the organization know about but no one recognized as a potential problem. Or a situation that a few people know about—maybe even planned—but failed to consider as a potential for crisis. Let's take a look at some of the components of a crisis communications plan and how they can help your organization prepare to respond.

Before we do, however, one critical issue remains. Because you are preparing to communicate in a crisis, don't assume you'll be sitting in your office when it hits. The building might have been washed away in a flood... or fire may have damaged it so access is restricted. You might be 3,000 miles away when disaster strikes. Or something could happen in the middle of the night or on a weekend. This means that

you have one more thing to plan for: where to stash copies of all the information in the plan. The choice is yours, but paper copies, backup CDs with complete information, or a password-protected Internet site are options to consider.

The Crisis Communication Team: Who's Who and What's What?

The crisis communication team is the group of people who not only will participate in communicating about the crisis but also will work to identify potential incidents and/or disasters and determine ways to respond to them. The team should be composed of senior-level executives or key line people in the following areas: operations, marketing, finance, legal, and public relations/communications. The CEO needs to be on the team, as do any other relevant executives. Often, the organization's entire senior or executive management team will participate.

“Good crisis communications is based on a system already in place. When there is a crisis, you just tighten it up and make it better... A crisis is no time to design a new system.”

*- Marvin Fitzwater,
former White House press secretary*

- **Roles and Responsibilities.** Decide who will make which decisions. It may sound strange, but, when the time comes, someone has to decide if you actually have a crisis on your hands or not. Once that's clear, who will handle on-site communications? Who will brief the media? Will there be one spokesperson, or will there be a trio or more to cover all relevant areas? Who will take media calls? Which member will be the liaison to the crisis management team? Finally, have a backup person for everyone on your list. Clarify all the roles and responsibilities, and write the plan down and distribute it so everyone knows who's who and what's what.
- **Designated Spokesperson(s).** What qualities do you want in the person who will communicate with the media and other publics about the crisis? He or she should be forthright, calm, able to convey information clearly and logically, and maintain his or her “cool” under pressure... you can establish any other criteria appropriate to your organization. Who on your team has those qualities? Equally important, who are the loose canons who could create more problems than they solve?
- **Spokesperson Training.** Once you identify spokespersons, plan to train them. Media training for spokespersons is one of the most overlooked of all communication elements, but it is critical to have people who are skilled in handling sometimes-intense questioning, who can take control of an interview, and who are familiar with some of the tricks of the media's trade—and how to avoid falling for them.

► **Key Contacts List.** Crises can happen at any time, and you need to be able to alert everyone on the team—and their backups—as soon as possible. Make sure you have work and home phone numbers, cell phone numbers, pager information, as well as vacation numbers and any other emergency contact information available. You also should have a brief bio of everyone on the team for use as needed.

“Life is one crisis after another.”

*~ Richard M. Nixon,
September 1980 interview*

Surfacing Potential Crises

While it's not possible to predict when and how a crisis will happen, you can anticipate the most likely sources of crisis in the organization. The easiest way to unearth vulnerabilities and dormant crises is to bring the crisis communication team together—with the crisis management team, if possible—and hold a brainstorming session. These are the folks who know the most about the organization and who will have valuable knowledge about its strengths and weaknesses. The objective here is to be able to figure out where trouble might originate so you can be prepared for any possible crisis.

Consider every unimaginable or unlikely disaster you can think of, vulnerabilities that could lead to crisis, and any planned crises, and write them down. The more you can identify now, the more possibilities you can prepare for, and the better your ability to respond. Include rumors as well as facts, but be sure you identify them as such and either validate or dispel them. Identify early warning signs for the crises and include these in your plan. This kind of preparation will put you well ahead in responding to crisis. Even if none of your scenarios surface, you'll have done sufficient planning to help you move quickly in any crisis situation.

► **The Unimaginable or Unlikely Disaster.** Since the attacks on the World Trade Center, we have become a nation in which no disaster is really unimaginable. Some things, however, are unlikely, given your location or what business you're in. For example, if you don't operate oil tankers, you probably won't have to deal with an oil spill caused by an under-sea earthquake damaging your ships. Most businesses probably don't have to worry about bombings or other types of terrorist activity, at least individually. More typical of crises in this category would be fires, explosions, floods, plane crashes, workplace shootings, and other events that cause extreme damage, injury, and even loss of life. You can speculate, for instance, that your facility located in a flood plain is washed away by severe flooding and lives are lost, a dangerous substance is released into the atmosphere, or critical inventory is destroyed.

► **Vulnerability-related Crises.** The interesting thing about identifying these vulnerabilities is that you sometimes can change the situation and end the vulnerability, thereby reducing or eradicating the potential for crisis. Your team needs to identify all possible vulnerabilities and determine whether there is a potential for disaster or if there is a fix that could be implemented. For example, if you are a manufacturer of any kind, do you have a sole-source supplier for critical components? If so, that's a vulnerability. If you can't get components, will that halt production? A fairly simple fix is to find an additional backup supplier. Is your company a candidate for a hostile takeover? Have you failed to comply with any regulations that could result in a shutdown of operations? Are there disgruntled former employees who could bring down your network? Again, for each possible crisis you identify, you can develop a plan or find a way to mitigate the potential for disaster.

► **Planned Crises.** No one would actually plan a crisis. But they will plan activities that can result, through shortsightedness, in a crisis. Perhaps your company is going to declare bankruptcy but hasn't planned on how to reassure customers and, more important, prospects whose deals aren't completed. Layoffs of large percentages of your workforce could become a crisis if the impact on the local economy hasn't been considered and planned for. If the Board of Directors decides to let the CEO and CFO go, that can become a crisis of confidence that causes stock prices to plunge or skittish customers to bolt, causing media attention to increase, thereby causing a greater loss of confidence if things are not brought under control. The impact of any of these actions can be mitigated if you develop and implement a communication plan.

Stockpiling Ammunition for Your Response

Once you have a sense of what potential problems you're up against, you need to start gathering information. The more you do beforehand, the less scrambling you'll have to do in crisis mode. Below are some examples of the kind of information your plan should include:

► **General Organizational Information.** If a crisis brings your organization under scrutiny by the media, you need to be sure that they understand who you are and what you do. You should have general information on your overall organization. You probably have this already, in the form of an annual report, corporate overview, organizational fact sheet, or something similar. If not, prepare something—a one-page summary will do. Be sure this information is kept up-to-date. The media gen-

"In crisis is cleverness born."

- Chinese proverb

erally will use the information you provide; if you give them nothing, they will find other sources—maybe even your competition.

➤ **Specific Organizational Information.** Once you have your organizational fact sheet, prepare one for each subsidiary, branch office, division, department, group, etc. Keep it simple... what each does, where they are, who's in charge, and any other information that you feel will be useful to the media.

➤ **Information on Potential Crisis Situations.** Collect any information available—reports, clippings, internal actions, minutes of meetings—and create a file for each potential crisis you identify. Include whatever might later help you discuss what happened and what protections or preventive measures were in place. If similar incidents occurred in the past, have available all information on what was done to correct the problem. Again, keep these files current.

➤ **Key Messages.** For each potential crisis you identify, develop three key messages that you will include in all your communications about the crisis. These depend on the situation, but should convey, at a minimum, your concern and sympathy about what happened; that you had procedures in place to prevent the situation from happening; and that you are taking all possible actions to resolve the crisis.

➤ **FAQ List.** It's pretty easy to figure out what questions the media will have about certain crisis situations. Take advantage of their predictability and develop for each potential crisis a list of frequently asked questions (and answers) that you can have at hand in case it happens. Then you'll just have to update it with current Q&A as the situation unfolds.

“The speed of communications is wondrous to behold. It is also true that speed can multiply the distribution of information that we know to be untrue.”

~ Edward R. Murrow,
CBS News, 1964 Speech

Internal Communications Protocol

Your employees are one of your most important stakeholder groups. In order to ensure that they know what's going on and how to deal with it, and in order to dispel rumor and speculation, you need to make employee communication a part of your plan. They need to know what to do if they suspect a crisis is at hand... and they need to know what is happening to prevent a loss of confidence on their part once a crisis has occurred.

➤ **How They Can Give You Information.** If someone in the organization thinks a crisis is at hand, whom do they tell? And whom does that person tell? Then what happens? Certain types of crises, like explosions, train derailments, and oil spills, will be immediately identified as crises and everyone will know about them. Other problems, such as picketers in front of

your building, might be noticed first by the security guard, and she needs to know who to tell, so someone can decide if a crisis is at hand. The crisis communications team's roles and responsibilities, along with directions on how to notify the team and what information is needed, must be made available to all employees. Publish them in your employee manual or on your intranet and make sure everyone knows that there is a policy and where to find it.

► **How You Keep Them Informed.** Since you really have as many spokespersons as you have employees, you need to tell them what is happening when a crisis occurs. They may not talk to the media—although reporters will try to get to anyone they can in a crisis—but they will be talking to their spouses, parents, friends, and others who'll be asking them about what's happening. In order to maintain control of communications in a crisis situation, therefore, you must plan how much you will say and how you will say it. Be prepared to create key messages that they can use to talk about the crisis. And figure out whether in-person briefings, department meetings, or some other processes will be used to communicate those messages. Finally, figure out how to surface rumors and create a method of putting them to rest.

Dealing with the Media

It should go without saying that dealing with media during a crisis will go better if you already have established good relationships both personally and for your organization. Many members of the media—and the general public as well—have a distrust of business and business executives. If they already know and trust you and your company, if you have established some credibility with them, you'll find crisis communications easier. If you don't have those relationships already, now is the time to work on them—before the crisis hits. While you're doing that, continue to work on the plan and be sure to include the following items in your preparations.

*“When a reporter approaches,
I generally find myself
wishing for a martini.”*

~ Jonas Salk

► **Media Contact List.** Every organization has one, but most don't keep them up-to-date. Media people move around a lot, so you should update this list on a regular basis and make sure the information is accurate. Then, like everything else in your crisis communications plan, make sure it's available in other locations besides your laptop or office computer.

► **Coordination Procedure.** As discussed in the “Roles & Responsibilities” section above, you need to have a written procedure in place as to how media contact will be coordinated. Who will take calls? How will they be routed? If you're the contact, who's the backup person? Who is allowed to give out what type of information? Who gets to talk to the CEO and when? Who will conduct

media briefings? The better this procedure is defined, the more smoothly things will go. A crisis is a time when you don't want any reporter's question or interview request to get lost, because if you're not talking to them, they will find someone else to talk to.

► **Media Access/Information Centralization.** If there is a disaster/crisis of major proportions, where are you going to put the media who will want to be close to the action? How much access will you give them to what's going on? Since you're planning in theory, you certainly can't decide definitively how things will be handled, but there are options you should consider: Will you have a media briefing room or just leave them all outside your front door and go out there to speak? There's some benefit in having a media workspace with phones, computers, etc., if you want to know who's there and let them file stories as they wait for new developments. You might decide this is a bad idea, but that will depend on the type of crisis.

*“In preparing for battle
I have always found that
plans are useless,
but planning is indispensable.”*

- Dwight David Eisenhower

Does the Plan Work?

Your plan is complete, all the pieces are in place, and you've put it on a CD and distributed it to all concerned parties. But you can't stop there. There are two things you still need to do: (1) make sure someone has the responsibility of keeping it updated, and (2) test it. A plan is a dynamic thing—it has to change as the situation changes. Someone has to update it as people come or go, contact information changes, or facilities are closed or expanded. If you get a new CEO and

Operations VP after writing the plan, you've got to update your contact lists, your roles & responsibilities, and you have to clue in the new people. Updating is critical—if you put the plan in a drawer and leave it there until a crisis occurs, you will likely have a plan that could fail.

Finally, you have to know if the plan works. Does everyone know what he or she is supposed to do? Where they're supposed to be? What to do if a reporter calls them? Who to notify if they think a crisis is at hand? The only way to find this out is to test the plan. Take an afternoon and put the crisis team through its paces. Ideally, more of the organization should be involved, but that is usually difficult to pull off. Create a crisis scenario, dust off the plan, and see if it works. Have a session afterwards to see what happened, what worked, and what needs fixing. Make the changes. Then put it away until it's time to update it. Even if there are no organizational changes, the plan should be reviewed at least every six months so you can make any needed adjustments.

If You've Planned, You're Prepared

The process above will give you a basis for your crisis communications planning. The important thing is that you plan—whether you use these components and methods or not. If you plan carefully, you should be prepared for anything that could come up. Because every crisis instills in us some panic and impairs somewhat our ability to think clearly, having a plan could make the difference between your being able to control the crisis or letting it—and the media—control you. If you lose control of the situation, the result could be a disaster you may not be able to recover from.

“Be Prepared.”

~ Motto of the Boy Scouts of America

“Be prepared for what?” someone once asked Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting. “Why, for any old thing,” said Baden-Powell.

When Crisis Occurs, Take the Offensive

Once a crisis occurs, you'll have no more than 24 hours—or as few as 30 minutes—to respond in order to gain control of the flow of information. Realistically, the amount of time will depend on the type and extent of the crisis, but there won't be much time, no matter what. If your plan is in place and up-to-date, you'll probably be able to get a basic assessment of the situation and prepare a statement in an hour or less.

Pull out the crisis communications plan and assemble the crisis team. Put your spokespersons on notice that their job is about to begin. Is this crisis one of the potentials identified in the planning process? If so, a lot of your work is done. If not, you'll need to see what is usable from what you have and what additional information you have to gather. Assess the crisis and define the problem. Whoever has the responsibility should start by obtaining as many facts as possible and validating information as thoroughly as is feasible. Determine the specifics—time, date, place, extent of crisis, injuries/deaths, and anything else you can find out. What do you know for sure and what is speculation? Combine this new information with the background information you have on file to complete the picture. Update the FAQs and go over the key messages you developed to make any necessary adjustments for the present situation.

- **Begin Internally.** Before you talk to the media or any outside publics, talk to your employees. Implement the employee communications plan you developed, and tell them as much as you can. If there are things you can't tell them, say so... tell them why you can't tell them. Deliver the key messages and make sure they know that those are the only things they should be saying to anyone outside the organization. Let them know you'll give them additional information as soon as possible; make sure you do.

➤ **Briefing the Media.** Once you think you have enough information to understand the scope of the crisis, craft a statement for the media. If your organization is responsible, say so, and make sure you express concern about what happened and let everyone know that you are dealing with the crisis. If you have enough information, you may want to take questions at this point. If not, advise the media that you will be back to them with an update as soon as more information becomes available. Make a decision, based on the rate at which information is coming in and the type of crisis, on how often you will update the media—every 3 hours, three times a day, whatever seems reasonable. Then do it.

Many organizations would rather not have to deal with the media at all during a crisis, but keep in mind that you really are talking to all your publics through the media. What you view as a dreary chore could actually be your opportunity to get your message out to all your stakeholders and an opportunity to enhance the perception of your organization overall and its reputation and credibility in particular.

When you talk with the media, use each opportunity to deliver the messages you want to get out. Even if you're doing Q&A, start by making a statement that contains all the information you want to give; you can't depend on the media to ask the "right" questions. Tell them how much time you are allotting for questions and don't go over that limit. Remember the following guidelines:

- Be truthful and answer only the questions for which you have answers.
- Don't speculate. Better to say something like: "We're looking into it and will let you know more as soon as we have the facts."
- Never say "No comment."
- Don't go "Off the record;" there is no such thing.
- If you don't know an answer but can get the information, say so, then make it available at the next briefing.
- Never lose your temper or your cool—consider the ramifications of starting a battle with people who buy ink by the barrel and videotape by the mile!
- Assume every microphone and camera are "on" unless you know for sure they are not.
- Don't say anything you wouldn't want to see or hear in the print or broadcast news.

Your goal is to remain in control, be firm, be respectful of their needs, and protect your credibility and that of your organization. The crisis won't last forever, and your media relationships need to last long past the crisis.

- **Document Everything.** Yes, it's a crisis, but take the time to write everything down. Keep a record of who said what when, so you can review and assess the effectiveness of the statements, the responses, and the decisions that were made.

Evaluate, Then Update the Plan

The crisis is over, things have settled down, and the news media has gone on to another story. But your job isn't over. Bring the crisis communications team back together for a post-mortem to see what was done, what worked, what didn't, and what needs to be changed. Factor in the results of the documented statements. Use this information to make adjustments to the plan so you'll be ready for the next crisis.

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