

What is Crisis Communication?



When crisis response goes awry, poor communication is often at fault. Poor communication typically takes any of the following forms:



Withholding too much information from interested audiences



Important spokespeople offering contrasting messages



Failing to correct the record adequately



A combination of the above

Effective crisis communication is needed to get things right. Crisis communication consists of the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a given crisis (Page Center Training, Penn State).

Crisis communication itself emerged from the field of Applied Communication. Applied Communication scholarship focusses on the study of a social issue or problem with the primary purpose of identifying solutions and recommendations to address the social issueⁱ.

Within the field, crisis communication deals with mediated messages to various types of audiences at moments of heightened pressure.

Crisis communications strategies

What then are the relevant strategies needed to ensure effective communications go to relevant audiences during critical events? It all starts with understanding the lifecycle of crisis communications. Like crisis management (more broadly), crisis communication has its own lifecycle, which includes the following stages (Page Center Training, Penn State):

Pre-crisis	Crisis	Post-crisis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor crisis risks • Make decisions about how to manage potential crises • Train people who will be involved in the crisis management process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect and process information for crisis team decision making • Create and disseminate crisis messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asses the crisis management effort • Provide follow-up crisis messages as needed

Of course, facilitating information flows, so that crisis decision makers and other relevant stakeholders are armed with the right information at the right time, has been a perennial challenge.

Mitigating the challenge, beyond simply understanding lifecycle of crisis communications, requires business leaders to recognise that knowledge and information are critical resources to the organisation.

Crisis leadership, in turn, can demonstrate the criticality of information by making that information accessible (where appropriate), understandable, and supportive of the organisation's larger resilience objectives.

What goes in the crisis communications plan?

All of the relevant crisis management communication strategies should be collated in the crisis management and communication plan, i.e., the set of guidelines and activities used to prepare an organisation for the knowledge-sharing aspects of an emergency or unexpected event. Below are the relevant steps for putting together a best-practice generic crisis communications plan:

1

Step 1. Understand the plan's purpose and scope.

Before putting pen to paper on the crisis communications plan, organisations should first consider some critical factors, including the plan's purpose and its scope. In other words, organisations must lay out what they are trying to accomplish with the plan and what material will be covered in it.

Beyond that, the planning process should also help organisations determine which audiences they are likeliest to communicate with during a crisis. Relevant audiences are likely to include:



Internal employees and families

- Senior management
- Crisis response team and other frontline responders
- All staff



Customers



News media



Policymakers and regulators



Suppliers and other partners



The community

As to the form they take, communications plans shouldn't be treated as standalone plans. Rather, they serve as important supplements (or annexes) to other incident plans and are only activated when the incident in question necessitates communicating.

Organisations must therefore consider the kinds of incidents that typically trigger the need to communicate with the public. Examples might include:



Public health crises



Active shooters



Natural disaster



Cyber incident



Civil unrest



Toxic material releases



Workplace violence

As for the plan itself, it will serve the following functions: (1) outline the protocols to follow in the event of an incident, (2) define the roles and responsibilities of team members, and (3) provide clear action plans for teams to execute.

2

Step 2. Nail down roles and responsibilities.

Key to successful crisis resolution is chain and unity of command. Even in the case of business communication during a crisis, organisations must clarify reporting relationships to eliminate confusion and ensure that everyone is able to control the actions of personnel that is under their supervision.

In crisis management in business communication, the CEO will typically emerge as the premier company spokesperson. Some organisations will tap others to serve in this de facto Public Information Officer (PIO) role. Responsibilities for that role include:

- Verify, coordinate, and disseminate accurate, accessible, and timely information on the incident's cause, size, and current situation, for both internal and external use
- Gather information about the incident, e.g., from Incident Command Centre and response teams
- Gather information related to the type of incident from professional sources, such as response agencies, technical specialists, and emergency response guidebooks
- Verify the accuracy of the information gathered by consulting with the Crisis Chair, other Crisis team members, response agencies, and/or technical specialists
- Coordinate dissemination of information internally to response teams and related resources
- Coordinate dissemination of information externally to key stakeholders, media, and the public

3

Step 3. Invest in the right technology.

Of course, communications plans don't just execute themselves even with the best people. Crisis management technology will be needed to establish a process for gathering, analysing, sharing, and managing crisis-related information and intelligence. The specific capabilities that matter include:



Rapid plan and team activation.

Leverage pre-configured crisis playbooks and checklists to allow quick activation and dispatch of your crisis response teams. Automate and track task allocation to ensure everyone knows what to do so you can restore normal operations ASAP.



Easily communicate and share information.

Built-in communication and collaboration tools like chat, email, SMS, and voice messages make it easy to work in real time with your team, to better coordinate your response and keep everyone informed.



A central location for incidents.

Monitor and generate crisis response tasks, as well as log and share updates, decisions, facts, and assumptions. Produce situation reports and save time briefing stakeholders on the latest.

Further crisis communications planning considerations

- **Messaging.** Internal and external messaging must be carefully considered. To this end, organisations must agree on and deliver shared, consistent messaging that resonates with the audience and aligns with the organisation's broader communications goals and objectives.
- **Reputation.** What information is shared—and with whom—will depend on many factors, including the expected harm or damage, regulatory compliance and reporting requirements, and cost efficiency. How and when information is disclosed, and how organisations handle the situation from a communications perspective, will ultimately affect the organisation's reputation in the industry and community.
- **Stakeholder management.** Transparency and honesty are critical in the event of an incident. Organisations should strive to be as transparent as possible with constituents and be honest about what is known versus unknown at any given time. That is because rumours can spread quickly, both internally and externally. Transparency and messaging to maintain control of the situation and respond and recover effectively will be needed to combat these rumours before they gain larger purchase with relevant audiences.
- **Accuracy and timeliness.** Communicate often and regularly throughout the lifecycle of an incident, both internally and externally. Any information disclosed during an incident, however, must be accurate and timely. The timeliness of notifications is critical to stakeholder communication and management. It is also important to stick to the facts versus speculation; accuracy of the information will influence stakeholder confidence and organisational reputation.

Source: A Guide to Effective Incident Management Communications, Carnegie Mellon University

Finally, crisis communication planning is easy to put off, especially for organisations who think crises won't affect them. But the likelihood of a crisis happening increases by the day.

Senior leaders, as such, must marshal the necessary resources to develop, maintain, test, and periodically update a crisis communications plan.

Indeed, the plan itself helps organisations save time during a crisis, where they will be focused on execution, rather than deciding what to do. Done well, crisis communication can only help organisations better understand the root causes of crisis as well as protect reputation and brand value by imparting relevant information to important stakeholders in as seamless a manner as possible.

Sources

- i. Mike Allen, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods: Applied Communication*. Available at <https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-communication-research-methods/i1796.xml#:~:text=Applied%20communication%20is%20communication%20scholarship,to%20address%20the%20social%20issue.&text=Applied%20communication%20is%20grounded%20in,a%20focus%20on%20theory%20building>



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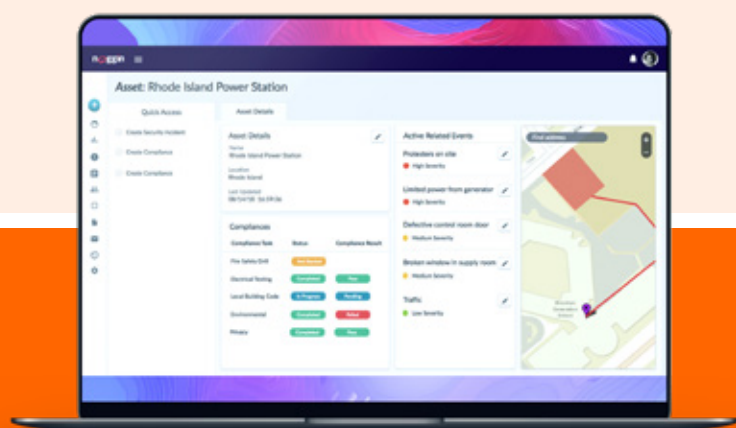
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