

Creating a Crisis Communications Plan

Step 1. The Risk Assessment

- **Get a champion.** CEO or a well-placed VP, but not many communicators will be able to draw the necessary support to develop a crisis plan.
- **Assemble the Crisis Communications Advisory Committee.** Representatives of every function in your organization from C suite to sales, HR, production, product management, etc.
- **Ask the group to list potential risks, and allow the participants to piggyback on each other's ideas.** For example, if the plant manager fears a catastrophic explosion, HR can imagine gaining a reputation of an unsafe workplace.

Step 2. Make It Fun

- **Don't call it a "Long Range Crisis Communications**

Planning Meeting." (Sounds very painful.) Instead, try "What keeps you awake at night? A magic pill to give you nightmare-free restful sleep!"

- **Serve food!** Everybody must eat; make it something most folks will enjoy.
- **Award prizes.** Award something for the best, most creative or most realistic nightmare, and just like kindergarten, everybody gets a prize!

Step 3. After The Meeting

- **Draft a summary report,** and circulate it back to the participants.
- **Pick potential advisory panel members** based on the value of their input, and always scout for new panelists.
- **Collect the best of the panel's recommendations,** edit your report and submit it to senior management as a Risk Assessment Study, the first step in your new Crisis Communications plan.

place a pushpin on your flip chart, assessing the likelihood, and news value. You could even challenge some of your graphic designers to help you develop a three-dimensional chart including organizational damage.

Remember, you aren't looking for specific solutions here, and if anybody starts talking in that direction, steer the conversation back to nightmares. Be the "task-master shrink" who forces your patient to face their nightmare. Just do it with a smile.

At the end of the meeting, hand out little gag gifts or presents. For example, you might award one of those little "Chinese finger traps" for "Worst Nightmare," or give everybody a badge, and "deputize" them as a member of the Nightmare Patrol. You just want the meeting to be fun.

Follow Up

After the meeting, draft a report, focusing on issues that are most likely, most impactful on the organization, and most newsworthy. Avoid beginning messaging or problem-solving at all costs. The objective at this point is to assess threats to the organization.

Circulate your draft to the committee. Thank them for participating and request their input on your document. Listen carefully to their recommendations, as there are two benefits here. First, they will make your product better, and they don't know it yet, and second, they have just tried out for the big leagues in crisis communications management and a seat on your advisory board.

The best contributors (and critics) will be an invaluable resource for years to come. Don't waste the time of those who don't contribute, or don't seem to understand the concept of what you are trying to accomplish. The ranking, or most senior member of a department might not be the best team advisory panelist.

When it's over, you have the beginnings of a valid Risk Assessment Study, and the start of a Crisis Communications Advisory Team. **PRN**

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