THE BOOK OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES & TACTICS
Foreword

Dear reader:

Crisis management is an art, not a science. In this 8th edition of PR News’ Book of Crisis Management Strategies & Tactics, you will discover many different views on this art, and you are certain to find takeaways from our contributors that will transform the way your organization handles crises.

Crisis management is an art, not a science. In this 8th edition of PR News’ Book of Crisis Management Strategies & Tactics, you will discover many different views on this art, and you are certain to find takeaways from our contributors that will transform the way your organization handles crises.

In addition, this book features sample crisis planning materials and resources that you can immediately add to your company’s crisis preparation protocol.

The authors in this book span a variety of disciplines and backgrounds—from agencies, corporations, nonprofits and academia—bringing you the latest strategies on how to prepare for and handle crises. These experts present hard-earned wisdom in these pages, offering step-by-step action plans for getting through the first moments of a crisis, tips for crafting messages under pressure, insight into dealing with social media trolls, checklists to gauge your readiness for a crisis and much more.

I want to thank the contributors to this Guidebook who so eloquently shared their ideas, tips and best practices. And I want to thank you, our reader, for taking time to learn more about crisis management. The current environment demands expert crisis management, and this book will help you deliver it.

B. Greene
Editor, PR News
# Table of Contents

Foreword ...................................................................................................................................................... 5
Index ........................................................................................................................................................ 188
Board of Contributors................................................................................................................................ 190

## Chapter 1—Media Relations.................................................................................................................. 11

A Proactive Approach to Working With the Media Before, During and After a Crisis ......................... 12
  *By Robert S. Fleming*

Media Management: After Newspaper Snafu, PR Is a Lifesaver for Navy Pier ................................. 17
  *By Victoria Gestner*

B2B Media Relations: How to Succeed in the Specialized World of Trade Press ............................... 19
  *By Keerti Baker*

How to Own Your Message and Protect Your Brand in an Era of Information Leaks ..................... 25
  *By Allison Steinberg*

Lessons from Organ Transplantation: Media Crisis Management Dos and Don’ts .......................... 29
  *By Joel D. Newman*

Strategies and Tactics for Becoming a Media Relations Miracle Worker ............................................ 33
  *By Cindy Bertram*

## Chapter 2—Internal Communications.................................................................................................. 37

How to Coordinate Your Internal Crisis Response Across Your Organization ................................. 38
  *By Nick Ludlum*

In a Snap: 15 Tips for Faster, More Effective Employee Communications in a Crisis ................. 42
  *By Deborah Hileman*

Using Multiple Channels to Understand and Improve Internal Communications .......................... 46
  *By Stephanie A. Smith*

Crisis Communications from the Inside Out: Internal Procedures for Emergencies ...................... 50
  *By Melinda Merillat*

Comcast Customer Service Debacle Points Out Need for HR/PR Collaboration ............................ 56
  *By PR News Editors*
Chapter 3—Social Media ........................................................................................................ 61
A Press Conference for Millions: Crisis Management in the Social Media Era ...................... 62
By Stuart Sweet

Managing a Digital Crisis Is About Owning It from the Beginning ...................................... 65
By David Andrew Goldman

Effectively Managing a Crisis on Social Media and Minimizing Public Backlash ................ 69
By Julie Staadecker

The Power of Social Media in Assessing Risk During Crisis Communications ..................... 73
By Ximena N. Beltran Quan Kiu

How to Use Social Media to Prevent, Manage and Recover From Crises ............................ 76
By Ann Andrews Morris

When Social Hits the Fan: How to Prepare for and Manage a Social Media Fail ..................... 81
By Ann Marie van den Hurk

The Role of Response Strategies on Social Media During a Health Crisis ............................ 84
By Michail Vafeiadis

Chapter 4—Executive and Spokesperson Training ................................................................ 89
Strive for Balance in Preparation for and Execution of Crisis Messaging ............................. 90
By Beth Whelley

Preparing Public Sector Executives to Shine During Crisis Communications ...................... 93
By Lauren Hansen

Taking a Stand: Communicating with Difficult CEOs Requires Thick Skin .......................... 98
By PR News Editors

Writing for the Eye, Not for the Ear: Turning Presentations Into Conversations .................. 101
By Karen Friedman

'I Take That Back!' How Lack of Effective Media Training Can Lead to Disaster ................. 104
By Jeffrey S. Morosoff
Chapter 5—Issues Management and Public Policy .................................................. 109

Responding to a Black Swan Event: Communication in the 2014 Ebola Epidemic .................. 110
By Jana L. Telfer

When Striving to Influence Public Policy, Communicate Early and Often.......................... 116
By Tonya Y. Parker

How to Rebuild a City’s Damaged Image: 7 Post-Crisis Lessons from New Orleans ............ 119
By Brad Weaber and Kelly Schulz

After a Public Scandal, PR Is Only as Effective as the Reforms It Leads To ......................... 121
By PR News Editors

As Companies Emerge from Scandal, It’s Up to PR Pros to Lead the Way ......................... 123
By PR News Editors

Chapter 6—The Crisis Plan ...................................................................................... 127

Hot Crisis/Cold Crisis: Rethinking PR’s Approach to Community Outrage ....................... 128
By Rusty Cawley

How PR Professionals Can Prepare for and React to a Data Security Breach.................... 135
By Liz Zarins

In the Heat of a Crisis, How Will Your Communications Plan Work? .............................. 140
By Gene Grabowski

The Impact of Security Breach Trends on Crisis Communications Planning ................... 142
By Derek Lyons

Breaking the CODE for Credibility and Winning Over Your Audience ......................... 146
By Leonard S. Greenberger

What’s Missing from Your Plan? The Role of Communications in Crisis Response .......... 150
By Simon R. Barker
Chapter 7—Case Studies.......................................................... 157
How a Mushroom Almost Poisoned the Reputation of a Respected Magazine .................................158
By Carol Klimas

The Brian Williams Iraq War Affair: A Teachable Moment for Crisis PR...........................................162
By PR News Editors

6 Truths of Social Media from a Grassroots Crisis Communications Campaign .............................165
By Christie M. Kleinmann

5 Crisis Communication Lessons Learned from the Ebola Outbreak .............................................171
By Mina Chang

Anthem's Cyber Attack Demonstrates Dos and Don'ts of Crisis Communications .......................173
By Anna Keeve

Crisis—Danger or Opportunity? Lessons from a Vampire Bombing Incident...............................176
By Sharon Thomas

Chapter 8—Sample Crisis Planning Materials and Resources .................. 181
Internal Crisis Communication Flowchart..........................................................................................182
Courtesy of Terry Bryan

Crisis Communication Questionnaire ................................................................................................184
Courtesy of Melinda Merillat

Pre-Written Crisis Alert Script ...........................................................................................................185
Courtesy of Melinda Merillat
Communicating information to employees and satisfaction with internal communication can make or break the success of an organization. Studies have shown that when employees have greater levels of communication satisfaction, organizations experience increases in retention rates and employee productivity. Likewise, employees experience increased job satisfaction and decreased absenteeism. However, understanding how to communicate effectively with employees can be challenging.

Media richness theory is a classic communication theory that encourages matching the communication medium (channel) to the message. Supervisors and employees use a variety of channels to communicate such as email, phone, instant messaging and video platforms. Combining the use of multiple channels with the theoretical foundation of media richness theory provides suggestions for how to maintain and improve employee communication satisfaction.

Media richness theory has emerged as one of the most widely studied and cited frameworks in the body of research on organizational communication and media use (D’Urso & Rains, 2008). The premise of media richness theory is that a communication medium should be matched to the needs of the message for effective communication (Lengel & Daft, 1988).

Richness concerns a medium’s capacity to convey various types of information cues in a manner that approximates face-to-face commu-
Media richness follows a continuum from high richness (i.e. face-to-face) to low richness (i.e. bulletin boards) for understanding the transmission of messages.

The richness of a medium comprises four major aspects:
1. The availability of instant feedback, which allows questions to be asked and answered
2. The use of multiple cues, such as physical presence, vocal inflection, body gestures, words, numbers and graphic symbols
3. The use of natural language, which can be used to convey an understanding of a broad set of concepts and ideas
4. The personal focus of the medium (Lengel & Daft, 1988)

When none or only a few of these attributes are present, a medium is considered “lean” (Sheer, 2011). Face-to-face is considered the richest medium because it allows for all four aspects important to communication. The most effective choice of media is that which matches the intended outcome for a message, which indicates whether a rich or lean media should be utilized for message distribution (Easton & Bommelje, 2011).

An employee's workplace communication satisfaction is positively and negatively influenced by the use of multiple communication channels.

Media richness theory holds that messages should be communicated on channels with appropriate richness capabilities. When information is communicated using an inappropriate channel, the information likely is to be misinterpreted or seen as ineffective with regard to the intended purpose (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). In addition, when a message and medium mismatch occurs, communication parties have to engage in compensating communication activities, which takes additional time and resources (McGrath, Hollinshead, & O'Connor, 1993).

Media richness research has spent a considerable amount of time identifying the limitations of one channel versus others. For example, David Jacobsen argued that new media, such as instant messaging and online communication, are limited in conveying the same amount of information as a face-to-face conversation. The absence of being in the same place makes physical and other non-verbal cues such as tone of voice and eye contact impossible (Kock, 2004).

Henderson and Gilding illustrated that communicating via lean mediums could affect the effectiveness and amount of self-disclosure, thereby influencing reciprocity and trust. Vivian C. Sheer’s 2011 study discovered that a popular reason for the abundance of instant message use between friends is the ability to control information and self-presentation, which could also be applied to co-worker relationships. D’Urso and Rains found support indicating that richness is based on perception and that it may be shaped by interpersonal factors such as one's relevant experiences, which is another finding that may lend insight into communication channel satisfaction between co-workers.

Results of an empirical survey of more than 500 full-time employees from a variety of organizations indicate that an employee's workplace communication satisfaction is positively and negatively influenced by the use of multiple communication channels.

For example, communication satisfaction is highest when a variety of channels are available, including instant messaging and video solutions. This increases communication satisfaction because it provides employees with a choice and
an opportunity to better match the medium to the message, supporting media richness theory. Moreover, employees can increase their communication satisfaction by using multiple channels to communicate the same message.

Employees and supervisors in the study noted how they can follow up face-to-face communication with an email recap or send an email alerting someone to an important voicemail message. Employees also favor the use of multiple channels when they need a written record of information.

While the use of multiple communication channels can increase employee communication satisfaction, the use of multiple channels can also decrease communication satisfaction when the channels are used inappropriately. For example, employees noted how they did not think instant messaging was an appropriate medium for transmitting important information but rather is better suited for informal, quick communications. Also, employees preferred to communicate with supervisors about big projects and evaluations face-to-face rather than through email or on the phone. When supervisors and employees rely solely on email or the phone for all communication, it strains the options for interactivity and reciprocity, which can elongate and complicate tasks. This point illustrates the implications of not matching the medium to the message, as suggested by media richness theory.

Finally, when employees do not feel competent using multiple communication channels, their communication satisfaction is lessened.

Media richness theory can be used as a guiding foundation to better understand employee communication satisfaction. With teleworking arrangements on the rise and employees constantly on the go, it’s important for management to understand how to maximize communication with employees using a variety of communication channels. The results presented highlight how matching the medium to the message and using multiple communication channels to distribute the same information can increase employee communication satisfaction.

Organizations should provide a variety of communication channels to employees so that employee communication satisfaction can be optimized. When employees experience greater levels of communication satisfaction, they also experience greater levels of job satisfaction, which increase productivity and retention rates, which lead to organizational benefits.

**Stephanie A. Smith, PhD., is assistant professor of public relations at Virginia Tech.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>DON’T</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use face-to-face communication for sharing important information when possible.</td>
<td>Use a channel simply out of convenience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information needing recall, such as talking points, via written channels like email.</td>
<td>Rely on channels that limit immediate feedback such as email and voicemail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider using multiple channels to share the same information. Send meeting minutes via email, or follow up an in-person conversation with a voicemail.</td>
<td>Use a lean medium to communicate a rich message. Match the medium to your message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a variety of channels available for use so employees can select the appropriate medium for the message.</td>
<td>Be afraid to try new things such as holding meetings via video solutions or using instant messaging for informal conversations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Chapter 4: Executive and Spokesperson Training

Preparing Public Sector Executives to Shine During Crisis Communications

By Lauren Hansen

When working in the public sector, the media are the most powerful resource you have to communicate your message. During a crisis, they can be your greatest ally and your biggest challenge. Unfortunately, many public sector executives do not enter into their positions with the proper training or experience to navigate the ebbs and flows of a crisis successfully in the public eye.

Good PR must not be an afterthought. As a public affairs professional in the public sector, you must approach the subject of training with your new executive as you would any tactical strategy for the agency. Many new executives, both public sector and otherwise, will not understand the need for training, especially without an impending crisis looming over their heads. It’s your job to make sure they understand that this crisis and media training is necessary to prepare for the inevitable. To handle the unexpected successfully in the public sector, they will need to gain a better understanding of how to best respond to each type of media.

Maximizing Positive Media Coverage to Minimize Public Scrutiny

In the public sector, you must always follow the golden rules of truth, clarity and timeliness when delivering messages. Public agencies are looking for their executives to lead them through the hurdles of each crisis, all while understanding the need for public accountability and transparency. During a crisis, executives are expected to:

- Provide thought leadership for the agency
- Deliver clear and transparent messaging to the public
- Offer positive positioning of issues to limit risk and fear
- Represent the agency ethically and with fortitude

It’s not all about the talking points. Developing binders full of talking points for every imaginable crisis scenario can help with messaging in a pinch. But if your key spokesperson doesn’t deliver the message correctly, it won’t be heard the way you anticipate. As the public affairs lead, you must help agency executives to identify their communications weaknesses and ultimately improve their presence in front of an audience.

Proactively developing messaging on controversial issues can help a public agency establish ownership of the issue and minimize negative press.

Non-verbal cues come across clearer than comments. These include:
Chapter 4: Executive and Spokesperson Training

- Body posture
- Hand movements and gestures
- Emotional reactions
- Use of verbal fillers such as “um” or “uh”
- Eye contact with the audience
- Breath while speaking, or using the “power of the pause”
- Energy level

Audit individual habits during presentations to both internal and external audiences (if possible) to gauge where the most improvement is necessary. Your frank evaluation of executives’ abilities is key to developing your training strategy and gaining their acceptance of your help.

What Is a Crisis Anyway?

Part of your training must involve crisis scenarios and mock interviews for your executive to get a feel for being interviewed under pressure. These activities can be done as part of a group leadership exercise or individually. For each executive in need of training, develop between three and five possible issues in which the agency could become publicly accountable. Give clear instructions to acknowledge and recognize the problem, get the facts out quickly and stick to talking points that can be updated as needed. Have them develop three key messages using terms the public can understand. Remind them to repeat the messages again and again during the interview. Here are some tips to answering questions in a crisis:

- Assure the public that the agency is doing everything possible to resolve issue.
- Correct mistakes.
- Answer negative questions with positives.
- Express concern for victims and their families.
- Give frequent updates with new information.
- Leave investigative details to the police.
- Focus on safety as the agency’s utmost priority.
- Use bridging techniques to guide the interview.
- Answer the reporter’s question, then stop talking. Do not fall for the “reporter’s silence” tactic.
This exercise should teach agency executives the benefits of being both proactively and reactively prepared for a crisis. Proactively developing messaging on controversial issues can help a public agency retain better control of the message, establish ownership of the issue and minimize negative press.

All Reporters Are Not Created Equal

When most people outside of the PR industry think of the media, television news reporters and print journalists are usually described as key news sources. However, in this day and age, the term "media" refers to seasoned investigative journalists to weekend bloggers and everything in-between. It’s your responsibility to prepare your executive for what to expect from these different types of reporters individually as well as how to handle a crisis briefing with all of the different types of media together.

Reporters can have different motivations for covering a story, from scooping the competition on a controversial topic to providing a public service to increasing ratings and selling more advertising. With all of the differences between reporters, they are all in search of an angle, the bottom line, facts that make sense and a story that sells or gets web hits.

■ Television: TV reporters are usually looking for immediate impact. Most are assigned stories the same day, if not moments before the interview, and will not have background about the topic they are covering, especially complicated details. You should assume the reporter and audience know nothing about your agency or the potential crisis and the background surrounding the situation.

It’s advisable to conduct a pre-interview with these reporters before putting your executive on camera. This will shorten the interview time, limit interaction and keep you in control of the message. Remember—there are typically only between eight and 12 seconds in a TV sound bite. Make those seconds count. Coach your executive to talk within the confines of a sound bite to help them remain on-point during the interview.

While the interview is being conducted, have your executive listen carefully to the reporter’s whole question without answering. Most people tend to listen to half of a question and then prepare their response during the second half, which is when the important part of the question is usually asked. Ask the reporter to repeat the question back if needed. It’s important for
them to repeat the key messages or themes throughout the interview several times.

Your audit of their non-verbal cues will come into play during these types of one-on-one interviews as well as during crisis briefings to all media.

- **Newspapers and magazines**. Print reporters usually have longer deadlines and tend to develop more in-depth stories than other mediums. They often have subject knowledge and background information or a specific beat, especially when dealing with government coverage. These are the types of reporters whom you can develop long-term relationships with.

  I have always looked to break complicated proactive messaging through my print reporter contacts. These stories typically get picked up after publication to be repurposed in other mediums. Print stories also tend to last longer under public view than stories on the newspaper website, and then can be picked up and republished by blogs.

  The reporter may use a single quote or an entire paragraph from your executive’s interview. They may also find additional sources of information to validate or contradict his/her statements. I recommend teaching your executive bridging techniques before these types of interviews to help steer the conversation. Prepare the executive with a lot of background information on other ongoing agency issues to arm him or her for potential side topics.

  I also encourage interview time limits, as these types of conversations can span longer than anticipated if not kept in check by a timekeeper.

- **Radio news**. News radio reporters usually have the most immediate deadlines and work on numerous stories per day. Their broadcast topic length is usually no more than one minute and tends to be updated several times a day.

  With radio interviews, the tone in your voice is the sole medium of your message. Coach your executive to modulate his/her voice and avoid verbal fillers. Pauses in mid-sentence are amplified over the airwaves, so it’s important to vocalize smooth and complete thoughts. Your executive needs to match or slightly exceed the host’s energy level to avoid sounding flat.

  The best tip for radio interviews is to have your executive use relatable examples to communicate the message. Doing so will help him/her get the message across and stop listeners from switching the station.

- **Internet news and blogs**. The Internet reporter’s job is to bring immediate informa-
tion to as many people as possible. If the Internet reporter is a part of a print news organization, they will work in completely separate departments with different motivations from the publication's print reporters and could cover the same story or issue without coordination.

Internet news blogs tend to reprint or replay previously aired/printed stories and publish briefs of 100 or less words that link back to an original news source. The reporter may or may not call for fact confirmation about what is published. In most instances, I encourage the public affairs professional to remain the main interview subject for this medium, developing messaging points and quotes for key staff and relaying that information to the reporter.

Train Agency Executives To Use You Effectively

Now that your executives have basic public crisis and media training, they are most likely going to look to you for your professional expertise to guide them through potential public landmines. Have them alert you to situations where the agency’s image could be called into question, an issue might make for a very good (or very bad) news story or if a problem may provoke controversy or stir up emotion. Make sure they understand your role as their executive adviser. You can help:

- Develop messages and key talking points
- Make sure the information is consistently portrayed throughout the life of the issue or crisis
- Work with staff for interview support
- Identify a reporter’s angle and try to improve a story, if possible
- Determine the best types of interviews to convey your message

It’s your role to guide public sector executives through the process of crisis communications preparations before a crisis occurs to fortify them to deal with tough questions, all before a crisis even occurs. If you are successful, your executive will be prepared to effectively position your agency for the public obstacles ahead.

Lauren Hansen is communications project manager at PRR.
What’s Missing from Your Plan? The Role Of Communications in Crisis Response

By Simon R. Barker

What do Sony's North Korea hack, Target's credit card breach, Dallas Presbyterian Hospital's Ebola incident and the NFL’s Ray Rice video have in common? The organization’s response actually made the situation worse. In fact, in most crises, the quality and effectiveness of the response has had more influence on the organization's reputation than the underlying event itself. Reputational damage should not be interpreted, however, as the inevitable outcome of a crisis. Rather, these events should serve as a wake-up call that typical approaches to crisis planning are insufficient and must be improved.

It's hard, if not impossible, to be proactive on an issue or event if you find out about it too late.

One of the most common mistakes made in crisis planning is to equate crisis communication with crisis management. While communications certainly is the “tip of the spear” and a critical, visible and impactful part of crisis management, it should not be mistaken for the whole. Yet, for many organizations, a crisis is by definition the point at which external stakeholders—media, investors, regulators, legislators etc.—start to make inquiries leading to the inevitable question, “What are we going to say?” From a crisis management standpoint, equally critical should be the questions, ‘Why didn’t we know about this earlier?” “Who needs to be involved?” And, of course, “What are we going to do?”

Without addressing these questions, you have (to continue the analogy) the equivalent of the tip without the spear, which will have no momentum, direction or impact. Your organization's response will not only be lacking but also the risk is high that the fault for a perceived poor response will be laid on the doorstep of communications.

Why Didn’t We Know About This Earlier?

One of the typical criticisms of crisis response is that an organization reacted too slowly, that the incident wasn’t taken seriously enough until it became public. This invariably results in a worsening of the problem when the organization becomes defensive and reactive. But it’s hard, if not impossible, to be proactive on an issue or event if you find out about it too late.

The ability to nip a crisis in the bud is only possible with:

- A clear reporting process defining how, when and to whom issues and events that have the potential to create significant reputational risk are identified and reported.
Chapter 6: The Crisis Plan

Reporting and Escalation

Does a shoot-the-messenger mentality at your organization mean that bad news is buried? Is plausible deniability more important than facing the issue and starting to address it? By redefining expectations and putting in place a consistent, fault-free process and criteria for flagging issues and events that could pose a significant reputational risk, organizations can overcome the typical reluctance to share bad news.

What Should Be Reported?

Most organizations, regardless of sector, want to make sure they know about the following types of events:

- Unexpected government inspections (FDA, SEC, IRS, ICE etc.)
- Unexpected on-site media visits or negative inquiries
- Injury or death of employees, visitors etc.
- Business outages over a certain duration

A strategic incident screening process analyzing and assessing information in a broader organizational context. Crises never happen in a vacuum. It's critical that an organization can connect the dots to anticipate the response required.

Defined parameters for crisis team activation detailing when and how the crisis management team will be engaged such that it's understandable and repeatable.

Incorporating issue and event reporting and escalation into a crisis plan allows an organization to take preemptive measures to mitigate the impact of the event while demonstrating to stakeholders, once it does become public, the seriousness with which the organization takes the issue. It also prevents the following problems:

- Relevant information not being escalated promptly, leading to a real or perceived slow response
- Different parts of the organization having completely different information and perspective on the risk, adding to confusion

Issue/Event Reporting & Escalation

1. Incident/Event
2. Incident Response Team Activated
   (Business Continuity, Cyber, or Product Recall Teams)
3. On-Site
   (Fire, Manufacturing Disruption Over X Hours, Fatality)
4. External
   (Legal Suit, Industry Crisis/Event or Media Inquiry)
5. CMT Member
   (Accounting Irregularity, Potential Leadership Scandal, Compliance Issue)

Return to Site or Incident Response Teams

Screening

- Option #1 Do nothing
  No broader strategic impact
- Option #2 Monitor
- Option #3 Convene CMT
Chapter 6: The Crisis Plan

Strategic Screening
Getting the information helps ensure that the response is timely and appropriate, but it’s only the first step. The information needs to be evaluated for its potential broader impacts and consequences. A screening group should be asking some of the following questions:

- Is the issue being appropriately managed at the site/location?
- What else could this event potentially impact from a strategic perspective?
- Which stakeholders may be affected?
- How bad could this become? Are there upside opportunities?
- What level of awareness outside of the organization is there that could drive external scrutiny?

Who Should the Screening Group Include?
The screening group should include no more than three functional areas in order to quickly evaluate the situation and make a recommendation on which team or teams should be activated. Its job is to connect the dots and requires understanding of broader strategic initiatives and the context of event, sensitivity to impacted stakeholders and understanding of overall response framework. Members could include:

- Communications
- Legal or risk
- Roles core to the organization’s mission, for example
  - Healthcare: Human resources
  - Manufacturing: Product management/R&D
  - Financial: Information technology
  - College/University: Student affairs
  - Food Production: Quality assurance

Neglecting to put a formal reporting and escalation process in place, assuming “we’ll know it when we see it,” virtually ensures that your organization will be behind the eight ball by the time you become aware of a crisis.

Who Else Is Involved and Who Is Doing What?
Some crisis plans describe only the communications team/roles—who is responsible for media relations, social media, internal communications, etc. Better plans also define the crisis management team (CMT), a defined, cross-functional group of senior leaders in the organization who need to be involved. Oftentimes, however, this CMT defaults to an existing executive leadership team, which may be too small to fully appreciate all the potential implications of the event, too large to be effective or lacking the appropriate expertise required to manage the crisis.

Even if there is a concerted and deliberate effort to define CMT membership, rarely is there acknowledgement of or references to the broader organization, including regional/country operations, specific business lines or issue-specific response plans.

Understanding in advance who is responsible for what ensures a fast, cohesive and effective response. This is only possible with:

- A clear response structure identifying the teams that may be activated, their roles and responsibilities
- A defined CMT with leadership, core members, extended members (who are required for certain specific issues and...
Defining the response structure and team roles in your crisis plan can help alleviate the tremendous stress on your leadership team as well as prevent the following problems:

- Lack of coordination
- Internal confusion over who is responsible for what
- Organizational silos (whether geographic or functional) impeding effective response
- Decisions being made prematurely or not at all
- Duplication of effort caused by lack of clear division of labor

When every move is critical and your leadership is under intense scrutiny, the last thing your organization needs is to be perceived as disorganized. An established response structure and practiced team ensure that the right people are in the room and ready to act when the situation requires.

**What Are We Going to Do?**

Crises are difficult enough to manage without making up the response process as you go along. Getting the team into the room (virtual or otherwise) is critical but insufficient. Chaos is not an acceptable operating model, and a defined management process helps effective response.

Too much happens too fast for a crisis management team meeting to go on for hours. Succinct and focused meetings are possible only with:

- **Efficient time management** including scheduled meetings, defined agendas and set end times
- **An effective information update and coordination process** increasing situational awareness in a consistent fashion, particularly critical if other teams are involved
- **Action tracking and accountability** utilizing simple management tools help ensure everyone is clear on priorities, action items, responsibilities and deadlines
- **Proactivity** ensuring a deliberate process to anticipate future risks and identifying strategic issues that will need to be addressed

Having a defined management process as part of a crisis plan facilitates focused and
efficient team meetings and prevents the following:
- Members having an out-of-date understanding of the situation
- Meetings that do not lead to decisions or where there is confusion about whether or not decisions have been made
- Meetings that are too focused on the specifics of the incident, too tactical or operational and don’t anticipate broader, strategic challenges
- Wasted time in meetings that last for hours

What Are We Going to Say?

Explaining in a consistent, credible and compassionate way an organization’s response will be the major determinant in shaping how the organization and its management team will be perceived. The sheer number of stakeholder groups—employees, customers, media, legislators, the Board, business partners, local community groups—coupled with the pressure and time constraints of social media highlight the importance of having key issues defined well in advance. Effective crisis communications is possible only with:
- A clear and expeditious approval process for key messaging that identifies who can/must approve in a fast-moving, fluid situation
- Defined spokesperson as well as clarity regarding the role of the CEO and who will be attributed in statements and/or speak to the press
- A social media crisis policy detailing the role social media will play in a crisis
- A communications “hold” policy clarifying that CMT activation immediately suspends all communications—even those completely unrelated to the event—unless explicitly approved by the head of communications
- Pre-agreed and approved messaging

for a specific number of issues/risks to expedite response at the time of an event, including holding statements, Q&As, etc.

A more detailed crisis communications addenda (or a separate communications plan) can define individual team members’ roles and responsibilities, press conference logistics, key reporters’ contact information and media training requirements for identified spokesperson.

Ensuring crisis communications is clearly defined as part of a comprehensive crisis plan prevents the following:
- Slow or insufficient communications
- Premature communications based on misunderstanding of situation and risks
- CMT meetings degenerating to word-smithing press releases with happy-to-glad edits rather than addressing unresolved strategic issues
- Inconsistent messaging or poor timing/sequencing of communications across multiple stakeholder groups, exacerbating reputational risk

Communications may be about what you say, but it’s critical that it helps inform the organization’s decisions about what to do as well.

If the crisis plan defines only the functional requirements of communications, it will undermine the critical, strategic role that communications should play in crisis management. Poor crisis response is almost guaranteed when communications is not at the table when decisions are being made, leaving communications with the job to explain potentially poor decisions that will not withstand stakeholder scrutiny.
Crisis Response Is About More Than a Process

Crisis management is more than a plan. It’s about having the right organizational mindset that actively incorporates reputational risk into the decision-making process. While others in the organization will raise issues of legal risk, financial risk, operational risk or strategic risk, it’s the role and obligation of the communications representative to raise strategic issues of reputational risk and to make sure that this perspective is incorporated into the team’s decision-making framework. Communications may be about what you say, but it’s critical that it helps inform the organization’s decisions about what to do as well.

Developing a crisis plan with the four components discussed above ensures that we learn about events sufficiently early to be proactive, removes internal silos and barriers to coordinated and effective response, defines not only who needs to be involved in decision-making but how that will be implemented throughout the organization, and gives communications a fighting chance and the opportunity to help inform strategic decision-making.

This broader approach to crisis management, particularly when supported by a solid risk management program and aligned with a proactive approach to issues management, can cement the strategic importance of communications in the organization both in advance of and during a crisis. This approach is critical to ensure that reputational risk created when there is a significant disconnect between what the organization does and what its stakeholders expect is minimized and the credibility of the management team is burnished.

Simon R. Barker is managing partner at Blue Moon Consulting Group.