



Template: Crisis Communications Plan

By Barefoot PR

What is a Crisis Communications Plan and why is it important?

When an emergency occurs, communication needs to be swift. Communicating honest, factual information in a timely manner is vital to maintaining an organization's integrity and reputation. Effective crisis management can help mitigate the negative repercussions of an act or event and ensure an organization is represented in the best possible light. To prepare for a potential crisis, it is critical to communicate before, during and after the instance.

What defines a crisis? For the purpose of this plan, a crisis is defined as the perception of an event that threatens an organization's performance, reputation, funding and/or stability.

List all possible crisis situations that should be considered for your organization.

During a crisis, staff, board and volunteers may want to know what is happening and how to communicate; those you serve may want to know how they are impacted; and the broader community may want information.

This crisis communications plan details the steps to take during a crisis and how to communicate. It is important to keep these items in mind:

- Be compassionate and understanding
- Accurately share your organization's actions
- Position your organization in an honest light, as a good citizen and as a credible source of information
- Report and interpret the crisis, keep damaging information in perspective
- Maintain contact with key audiences
- Achieve quick resolution
- Gain knowledge

What to Do During a Crisis

No two crises are alike, so the response will depend in large measure on the nature and magnitude of the situation. However, the following steps are good communication practices during a crisis situation.

1. **Immediately Convene the Crisis Team.** The crisis team should be pre-determined and consist of organizational leadership and necessary consultants. The team should assess the situation, gather information, identify a primary spokesperson and determine who else needs to be involved in determining a response strategy.
2. Use key messages prepared in advance as a guide and create additional key messages, as necessary to specifically address the situation. These messages should serve as the framework for all communications during and after the crisis situation.
3. As a general rule, communicate proactively with staff, those you serve and volunteers, and communicate reactively with the media.



4. Communicate with your staff, those impacted and volunteers first. They should not learn of the crisis from another source. Make sure they have the name and contact information of the identified spokesperson so they can forward along any external inquiries they receive.
5. Next, communicate with secondary audiences (e.g. donors, partners, community supporters, etc.). You want them to hear about the situation from your organization, not the media should it escalate to this level.
6. Make sure your media response materials are ready by the time your first communication goes out. Word travels fast, and the media could find out within minutes. If you receive calls from reporters before you are ready to respond, take down their contact information and deadlines, and tell them a spokesperson will get back to them as soon as possible. Do everything you can to meet their deadlines. Never say we have no response.
7. Keep a log of media inquiries and your responses.
8. Monitor the public's response to the crisis, and adjust your messages and strategy if people are responding negatively or if more information needs to be provided. Ways to monitor the public's response: social media monitoring, emails to general information addresses and employees' email addresses, voicemails to general phone numbers, etc.

Steps to Consider

1. Verify the Situation
2. Activate a Pre-Determined Call Tree
3. Research & Evaluate the Situation
4. Define a Response Strategy & Develop Key Messages
5. Monitor Public Information
6. Prep Your Spokesperson
7. Communicate with Key Audiences

A complete Crisis Communications Plan will elaborate on each of these steps based on your organization's policies and procedures. Some elements to consider for each step are noted below.

Step 1: Verify the Situation

Develop a Crisis Situation/High Profile Incident Report Verification Form to answer the following questions:

- What happened?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- Who is involved?
- How did it happen?
- Have any outside agencies been asked to respond?
- Could this situation impact your organization's reputation, integrity, funding or stability?

Once initial information is gathered and it is determined it is a crisis situation, the Crisis Communications Team should be activated.



Step 2: Active the Call Tree

Once a crisis situation is determined, it is critical to immediately activate the crisis communications team through a pre-determined call tree or internal communications process.

Step 3: Research and Evaluate the Severity of the Situation

Understanding the situation is critical to forming an appropriate response strategy. Before responding publicly, the crisis communications team needs to gather as much information as possible and determine the severity of the crisis.

Note: Detailed Crisis Communications Plans may include different levels of response based on the severity of a situation. Each of these levels will have different factors to consider and different response requirements.

Step 4: Monitor Outside Information

To help control messages, it is important the media know your organization's perspective on a high profile situation. When media does not contact you for a direct statement AND the Crisis Communications Team observes media outlets are getting information from other another source(s), it is imperative to reach out to media to share your perspective.

The following steps should be taken to monitor coverage:

1. Review coverage of the situation on media outlet websites/other platforms and conduct regular online searches for key terms associated with the situation.
2. Identify story trends associated with the coverage
3. Update Crisis Communications Team as needed

Step 5: Define Response Strategy and Develop Key Messages

During a crisis, it is critical to respond quickly. Once information is gathered and the severity of a situation is determined, it is important to determine how to respond to the situation. Since every situation is different, the Crisis Communications Team will need to form a response strategy for various target audiences important to your organization.

Once audiences are determined, identify a list of communications platforms your organization has access to (i.e. website, email blasts, social media, front desk, staff, board members, partner mediums, media, etc.).

Develop your Key Messages to include:

- An overarching positioning statement on the situation
- Clear and concise talking points for organizational spokesperson

Step 6: Prep Your Spokesperson

Share your overarching positioning statement talking points with your identified spokesperson and develop potential questions for media interview and general response preparation.



General tips include:

- It is acceptable to tell the media you are working to confirm a report or gather information. Do not let them pressure you into giving immediate information; information is often very fluid at the start of an event and you will need time to properly assess a situation.
- Coordinate messages with appropriate partner agencies to ensure consistency and collaboration.
- Do not share too much information with media and use your best judgment on what should be considered “public.”
- Do not share confidential information.
- If you have heard from one or two media outlets, assume the others have already or will quickly hear of the situation. If you have not heard from the media, don’t jump the gun and follow your Crisis Communications Plan.

Step 7: Communicate with Key Audiences

Share information with your key audiences by following your plan and utilizing key messages.

Resources to Include

Consider including the following documents in your Crisis Communications Plan:

- Your Organization’s Media Policy
- Media Inquiry Log Sheet
- General Talking Points for Immediate Response
- Pre-Identified Press Conference Staging Areas (if appropriate for your organization)

Tips for Working with the Media

Reporters are not the enemy, even during a crisis. Their job is to cover and report news stories. Your job is to reach the public with your key messages, and reporters/media outlets remain the best conduits for doing so other than direct to audience communications channels.

As with all relationships, there will be tension. Reporters work in a climate of instantaneous communication, immediate deadlines and intense competition — the information cannot come fast enough for them. During a crisis, all of the facts rarely are available immediately, which means reporters will be after something you may not have right away.

Understand your best chance to control the story is to provide the facts — and your take on the facts — quickly and responsibly, so tell reporters what you know when you know it, and offer to tell them more when you learn more.

This does not mean you need to meet all of a reporter’s demands or answer all of his or her questions. You do not want to cede control to the reporter, but you do need to treat him or her professionally and respectfully. You also have a right to expect the same in return. That’s how this relationship works.



Some other guidelines for working with the media — and communicating in general — during a crisis are:

- Return calls promptly even if you cannot answer all of their questions at that time.
- Do not withhold information from reporters that is publicly available or that you are sharing with members or other large audiences. This will only arouse suspicions, and when they eventually learn this information, they will likely write or broadcast another story — which only serves to extend coverage of the crisis. Get all of the bad news out at once.
- Accommodate reporters but know your rights especially when it comes to media on your organization's private property.
- Avoid saying, "No comment." There are instances when you should not comment, but offer an explanation.
- Tell the truth. Your organization's credibility depends on it and is critically important in a crisis.
- Give simple, affirmative answers. Avoid jargon and obscure abbreviations. If the reporter uses pejorative or loaded words in his or her question, do not repeat them in your answer or get defensive.
- Know when to stop talking. Give the answer you want to give and nothing more. Let the reporter fill the silent spaces. If the reporter asks the same question but in a different way, give the same answer. There is nothing wrong with repeating your key messages and the facts.
- Stick to your key messages and the facts. Avoid speculation and opinions—be clear about what you know and what you don't.
- Feel free to say, "I do not know" or "I will need to get back to you" – and follow up appropriately and in a timely manner.
- Make clear you are taking the crisis seriously. Do not attempt to downplay what happened or blame someone else.
- Be human. Speak in personal terms when possible, and express regret and sympathy — even if you don't believe your organization is responsible for what happened. Remember: You are talking to the public through the reporter.
- Provide reporters with a news release or statement, so they have the facts in writing. This increases the possibility of reporters getting the story right and reduces the likelihood of them asking questions and quoting your spokesperson about the unflattering details of the crisis.
- There is no such thing as "off the record." Avoid casual conversations with reporters. If you do not want to read it in the paper or see it on TV, do not say it.
- Do not take the requests personally. Media attention is rarely entirely positive — and it never is in a crisis. Do what you can to make the best of a bad situation, but do not be offended if the coverage is unfavorable despite your efforts.