



Crisis Response Communications

For any organization, preparation for emergencies is essential. And having a comprehensive Crisis Communications Plan is a critical part of that preparation. Not only does it help you to manage a crisis and protect your organization and its reputation, just as importantly, it provides guidelines for honest, empathetic and authentic communication that will help your community heal.

First and foremost, it's important to remember that victims and their families are looking for three things following a crisis:

1. An honest and transparent explanation
2. An apology
3. To see changes implemented as a result of the crisis

That's why it's important to keep the following communication goals in mind:

- Show compassion and understanding—people come first
- Accurately reflect your organization's actions
- Position your organization as a good citizen and a credible source of information
- Report and interpret the crisis and put potentially damaging information in perspective
- Maintain contact with priority audiences both internally and externally
- Achieve quick resolution
- Gain knowledge for future prevention strategies

Crisis Communication Roles

Before a crisis hits, it's important to establish a Crisis Communications Team (CCT). The composition of a CCT may vary depending on the size of the organization, and there may be some overlap of roles. When developing roles for your CCT, keep these categories in mind:

- Operations
- Communications
- Subject-Specific Experts

Exactly who fulfills the roles in your CCT will depend on the skill sets and capacity of the team available to you. Candidates will often be drawn from the following:

- President/CEO/Executive Director/Camp Director
- Marketing and Media Director/Public Relations Administrator
- Department Heads from various areas of your organization
- Board Members

Note: Often, the in-house PR Administrator does not have communications expertise specifically focused on crisis communication, as their knowledge usually lies in proactively promoting the organization. Consider using an agency or independent consultant to handle public crisis communications, which is often more reactive in nature.

As part of the planning process for creating a Crisis Communications Team, outside resources that could supplement or fill gaps in the team should be considered and relationships—either formal or informal—developed as appropriate.

Specific roles and responsibilities within the CCT should be assigned and written. While the President/CEO/Executive Director/Camp Director may oversee the CCT, they may not be the CCT leader.

Note: When building your CCT, use titles as opposed to specific names when identifying roles (i.e. don't say "Sally will contact the Chairman of the Board").

Roles and responsibilities may include:

Crisis Communications Team Leader (CCTL)

- Coordinates communication response
- Oversees message development
- Provides final approval on all publicly disseminated information
- Works with senior advisors to coordinate emergency team meetings
- Oversees broad and specific team functions
- Ensures required resources are available for team member-assigned duties
- Communicates with Crisis Response Team

Assistant Crisis Communications Coordinator

- Assists the team coordinator with prioritizing duties and handling inquiries
- Fulfills all the duties and responsibilities of the CCTL in their absence
- Assists with media relations and works closely with the spokesperson to ensure message accuracy
- Coordinates/assists with establishing the technology needs for the media and family sites
- Oversees/assists the technology communication needs for the situation, including: computers, internet, e-mail, phone lines, printers/copiers and fax machines
- Works with CCTL to provide up-to-date information on the web/website
- Monitors website comments and provides updates to the CCT

Other logistical responsibilities to consider:

- Establish a location for communications operation center
- Determine a "press room" or holding area for on-site press
- Point of contact for on-site press
- Point person on CRT on/off site
- Assemble a press kit that includes: the organization's safety protocols for various area-specific crises, fact sheet, history or back ground of organization and its mission
- Communication with your attorneys
- Keep crisis inquiry log from public/media
- Coordinate family communication and response
- Develop a list of industry and subject matter experts
- Keep current contact information
- Identify and train spokespersons

On Selecting Spokespersons

Each CCT should have people who have been pre-screened and trained to be the lead and/or back-up spokesperson for different channels of communications. The decision about who is chosen to speak should be made after a crisis breaks, yet the pool of potential spokespersons should be selected and trained in advanced.

Always consider the right skills, the right position and the right training. Some people may be effective at written communications, yet they may not have effective on-camera skills. Spokespersons should be empathetic, authoritative and articulate, believable, knowledgeable and available.

Consider professional training. There is a critical difference between proactive PR, which focuses on promoting your organization and crisis communications, which focuses on preserving your organization.

Certain types of crises (i.e. significant loss of life) mandate that the CEO be the lead spokesperson.

Note: Spokespersons are needed not only for media communications, but for all types and forms of communication, internal and external.

In the end, spokesperson(s) should do their best to deliver prepared messages calmly and with forethought. Those who operate in this critical role should lead with empathy. It is the duty of any spokesperson to project a forthright, credible, cooperative, and authoritative demeanor—and stick to the message while maintaining their humanity. The audience should be able to trust that the organization has their best interests at heart, and have the opportunity to actually hear the spokesperson(s) addressing their key concerns.

Identifying Your Audiences

When planning your crisis communications, it is important to identify all of your audiences—both internal and external. In doing so, consider everyone who may be affected by the crisis, both directly and indirectly.

Internal Audiences

- Participants/campers and their parents/guardians
- Staff and volunteers
- Board members
- Other associated organizations
- Family members affected by the crisis

Note: If campers/participants are under the age of 18, remember parent/guardian permission should be obtained (preferably in writing) prior to giving any information.

Remember staff members are very important audiences. Whether you want them to or not, they will communicate information about the crisis to other stakeholders. Make sure they are properly informed.

External Audiences

- Medical authorities
- Fire officials
- Law enforcement officials
- Other government agencies
- Members and participants

- Donors and supporters
- Community leaders
- Community residents
- Media

Establish Notification Systems

Having the means to reach internal and external audiences using multiple modalities is important. Consider technology that can be set up to automatically contact your pre-established database.

There should also be mechanisms for rapidly locating key staff (e.g. "check-in web pages" and "call-in lines"). The organization's website can be a go to source for information. It can be updated quickly and can provide a forum for the organization's stance on the situation.

Monitoring Responses

Intelligence gathering is also an essential part of both crisis prevention and crisis response. Stay informed on what is being discussed regarding the organization by monitoring traditional media as well as social media by establishing monitoring systems in advance (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, etc.). This monitoring will allow you to accurately adapt your strategy and tactics based on the views and conversations of staff, participants/families and other stakeholders—and to make sure you are keeping the genuine concerns of your community at the heart of your decision making.

Note: While it may be tempting, never respond to comments in social media blogs or chats—even anonymously—unless the communication has been authorized by the CCT. All communications can be later pulled for legal purposes.

Train personnel to report what they are hearing/seeing to the CCT:

Develop "holding statements" and templates for various scenarios and audiences.

The organization's CCT should regularly review holding statements to determine if they require revision and/or whether statements for other scenarios should be developed.

Suggested Communication Templates

Parent Phone Call

- Determine how to address parents/caregivers of a child who has experienced harm/injury/death
- Plan how to open and close the conversation

Staff Meeting

- Determine the layout for leading a staff meeting after a crisis

Words of Compassion

- Plan on how to share information with staff quickly and compassionately
- Using meaningful phrases, like "I have difficult information to share with you all..." is important

Camper/Participant Communication

- What does this look like and what to say if permission has been given
- What to say/refrain from saying if permission has not been given

Letters Home

- A simple, generic statement will help reassure your various audiences that you are aware of, and addressing, the issue—while buying you time to prepare a full briefing on the situation

Sample Holding Statements

- “We are in contact with the victim’s family and are doing everything we can to support them.”
- “We are investigating the incident.”
- “We are cooperating with the authorities.”
- “We will be reviewing our procedures and making any improvements necessary to help prevent a repetition of this incident.”
- “We will immediately put in place any recommendations.”
- “We are devastated, we pride ourselves on our excellent safety record and this is the first time anything like this has happened in our 20-year history.”
- “We have implemented our crisis response plan, which places the highest priority on the health and safety of our members and staff.”
- “Our thoughts are with those who were in harm’s way, and we hope that they are well.”
- “We will be supplying additional information when it is available and posting it on our website.”
- “I know that today was difficult for the members of our school/camp/community. I am proud of our staff and students/campers for how they handled themselves and for following all security procedures.”
- “Open communication is an important part of building a strong partnership with parents. For this reason, I want to provide you with some additional information about the incident that occurred today.”
- “Open communication is an important part of building a strong partnership with parents. For this reason, I want to make you aware of a situation that happened this morning.”

Suggested Communication Templates

The first thing to do is to gather your information:

- Verify and assess the crisis: who, what, when, where, how, and why
- Do you have all the facts to the best of your knowledge?
- Is there other information you need in order to put the situation into perspective?
- Make sure that information credible and consistent from several source
- Assemble the CCT in person or by conference call

Note: Depending on the intensity of the situation, it is possible that all of these steps could be taken within the first three hours of a crisis and then repeated as needed during the course of the situation.

Next, you need to determine the severity of the crisis so you can manage the scale of your response.

Asses the crisis level

Level 4—Highly Intense

- Media have an immediate/urgent need for information, and the CEO may need to provide opening statement of empathy/caring
- One or more groups or individuals express anger or outrage
- Broadcast and print media appear on-site for live coverage

Level 3—Intense

- Crisis causes growing attention from local and regional media
- Media gathers information on the crisis from non-CCT staff
- In addition to the media, stakeholders and community partners are present at site
- Affected and potentially affected parties threaten to talk to the media

Level 2—Moderately Intense

- Crisis situation may/may not have occurred; the situation is attracting slow, but steady media coverage
- External stakeholders receive media inquiries
- The public at large is aware of the situation/event but it is attracting very little attention

Level 1—Minimally Intense

- Crisis attracts little or no attention
- Pre-event information requests are received
- Public and/or media are virtually unaware of crisis

Once the crisis level has been determined and any factual information to be communicated has been confirmed, plan a response strategy for communicating critical information and responding to potential questions for each audience.

Start a crisis inquiry log

- Caller name/where from (e.g. media, employee/family, public, board member etc.)
- Date/time of call
- Phone number/email address
- Inquiry
- Deadline
- Person taking the call/receiving the inquiry
- Person responding to the inquiry/spokesperson selected (record date/time of response)
- Identify main on-site contact person and method for receiving inquiries.

Equip the communications operation center with the following:

- Computers/Internet access
- Copy machine and paper
- Electrical outlets
- Electrical power strips
- Fax machine and paper
- Flip charts and black or blue markers
- Masking tape

- Notepaper/pens
- Telephones (landlines) especially if cell phones don't work in that area

Media Holding Area

Set up a holding area for the media if necessary, keeping in mind that some will come with satellite trucks.

- Have media check in when they arrive
- Check for appropriate media credentials
- Have an escort with them at all times

Pre-Scripted Messages

Modify pre-scripted messages or develop new messages for each potential audience. Have no more than three main messages, keeping them simple, factual and compassionate. It is important that CCTL and CEO approve messages that will be distributed.

- Script for conveying key points of information
- Refer to a list of questions that could be asked by a variety of audiences (e.g. families, media, partners, organizations)
- Be prepared to address the organization's history/ track record relative to the crisis, (e.g. security protocol, program safety, treatment of employees)
- Identify the best methods for delivery of key messages
- Connect and update family members before making any announcements to the media
- Make sure information is accurate
- Anticipate and be prepared to handle difficult questions regarding who was at fault, compensation, lawsuits and timelines

Reminder: The three things that victims and families look for following a tragedy: an honest and transparent explanation, an apology, and to see changes implemented as a result of the crisis.

Post-Crisis Review

To improve the various elements of crisis communication, conduct a formal analysis of what was done well/not well and identify areas to be improved. The crisis communication plan should be reviewed and approved by operational and communications staff and should be updated, at a minimum, twice a year to verify that the information and protocols are accurate.

Guidelines for Working with the Media

The media play an important role in informing the community, and they will do so with or without your help. The major conflict between the media and your organization with a crisis is one of control. Providing information responsibly and quickly is your control lever, even if your story isn't perfect.

That's why it's important to develop a widely known written policy regarding who and when a statement will be made to the media. All staff must know to refer all queries to the CCT.

Remember the media is NOT your audience. They are the interpreter and storyteller for your message. Reporters may incorrectly conclude something or misquote. Things may be relayed out of context. You may want to touch base with the reporters so inaccuracies are not repeated.

The most important members of the media are local newspapers, radio and TV reporters. They will be a main source of information for employees, their families and others in the community. Know and have established working relationships with your local media, and understand their needs and concerns.

Consider the following when working with Reporters:

Short Deadlines

- Reporters operate with and must meet short deadlines.
- Provide them with follow-up information and updates in a timely manner.
- Reporters appreciate it if you ask when their deadline is, then meet it.

Space Limitations

- Reporters cannot always include the background information you provide.
- Reporters prefer succinct responses. Keep information to no more than three points.
- Reporters love concise sound bites. Provide your message in approximately 27 words total.

Competition

- Reporters are competitive.
- Reporters should be given information equally—avoid exclusive interviews that favor specific media outlets.

Proximity

- Desired closeness to the location of the crisis for TV reporters is likely a live location that puts your site behind the reporter as they introduce the story

Visual Opportunities

- Prepare a television “b” roll to carry a narration track
- Grant limited access to the property as long as it does not interfere with an investigation or severely impede operations
- Interviews with spokesperson providing account of the crisis and steps taken
- Interviews with people affected by the crisis
- Periodic updates

Expect reporters to ask for interviews with:

- Victims
- Witnesses
- Management spokesperson(s)
- Members and participants

Expect reporters to conduct outside interviews with:

- Knowledgeable outside experts (recommend your allies if possible)
- Local government leaders
- EMTs, physicians and other rescue personnel

Consider the following when preparing to work with the media:

- Provide information in a timely manner

- Prevent information vacuums where speculation and rumor can grow and have a serious impact on the situation.
- Stick to facts, sources and relevant materials, not opinions or speculation
- Have easy-to-read materials with important information ready for distribution
- Have readily-available points of contact to identify people who can speak with the media directly and/or provide 24-hour contact information
- Scheduled press conferences and released statements are the most efficient way to brief non-local media

Crisis Communication Do's and Don'ts

Do's

- Remember people come first – lead with empathy.
- Do your homework.
- Know your audience and talk from the viewpoint of the audience's interest.
- Be as knowledgeable as possible about the issue.
- Prepare, believing that the questions you dread will be asked.
- Rehearse, rehearse and rehearse.
- Be sure and prompt with facts, and cautious with conclusions.
- Release bad news completely, clearly and quickly.
- Keep it simple.
- Speak from your own experience—this makes it harder to contradict you.
- When possible, support your statements with facts, statistics, quotes from experts, comparisons and examples of real people.
- When uncertain, feel free to say: “I don't know.” “Hold on a second.” “I'll have (name of spokesperson) get back to you on that.” “Please repeat your question,” (you may get a 'better' question on second try).
- Speak from a personal perspective when possible, to enhance credibility using “I,” instead of the less personal “we”.
- If appropriate, take some responsibility, to become more believable.
- TALK-and-STOP. Let the reporter fill the silent spaces. These are vulnerable moments that are important to your message.
- Remember, an interview is not over if you are still in the reporter's company.
- Stick to your point.
- Suggest other sources—carefully selecting those who agree and disagree with your choice of opponents—to minimize space for extremists.

Don't's

- Don't release names of any victims without permission.
- Don't give misleading information—when credibility is gone, it's all over.
- Don't downplay what happened.
- Don't bluff—instead say, “I don't know”, “I'll find out”, or “I'll get back to you”—then follow through with your promise.
- Don't be a salesperson. Give well-thought out answers, backed by facts while being businesslike but friendly.
- Don't do anything that can be interpreted as an attempt to influence or control the interview.

- Don't request copy approval.
- Don't give your personal opinion—reporters will always assume you speak for the organization.
- Don't speculate or answer hypothetical questions.
- No jargon—speak plainly avoiding technical terms.
- No blame—take no sides, give no opinions on right and wrong.
- Don't violate the privacy rights of individuals.
- Don't feel you must answer every question.
- Don't ever go “off the record”—if you don't want it published, don't say it!

Note: Don't say, “No comment.” Instead, decline with courtesy and tact by saying:

- *“I don't want to answer that until we have all the facts.”*
- *“I don't want to answer that until we've investigated further.”*
- *“I don't want to answer that because it's the subject of an investigation or litigation.”*

Use “bridge away” phrases like:

- *“That's an interesting question but I think the real issue here is...”*
- *“Do you think so? That's not what we're hearing.”*
- *“Facts seem to indicate that ...”.*

Guiding Principles to Remember During a Crisis

How you respond to a crisis will vary depending on the specifics of the situation at-hand. However, keeping the following general principles in mind will help you to respond to any crisis effectively and efficiently, allowing you to be there for your community when they need you most.

- Plan and train before any crisis
- Train before the media arrive
- Put panic aside; listen to everyone
- Be friendly, always keep your temper
- Always correct reporters' misstatements
- Respond to a hostile questioner as you would to a friend
- Anticipate: What's next? How can you influence it?
- Having cultivated the media, rely on your understanding of how they work
- Be empathetic about the crisis—but without sentimentality
- Operate in confidence but without ego
- Trust your judgment and life experience in making tough calls
- Provide necessary support for your employees