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The 10 Steps of Crisis Communications

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Crisis: *Any situation that is threatening or could threaten to harm people or property, seriously interrupt business, significantly damage reputation and/or negatively impact the bottom line.*

Every organization is vulnerable to crises. The days of playing ostrich are gone. You can play, but your stakeholders will not be understanding or forgiving because they've watched what happened with Fukishima, Penn State/Sandusky, BP/Deepwater and Wikileaks.

If you don't prepare, you will incur more damage. When I look at existing crisis management-related plans while conducting a vulnerability audit (the first step in crisis preparedness), what I often find is a failure to address the many communications issues related to crisis/disaster response. Organizational leadership does not understand that, without adequate internal and external communications, using the best-possible channels to reach each stakeholder group:

- Operational response will break down.
- Stakeholders will not know what is happening and quickly become confused, angry, and negatively reactive.
- The organization will be perceived as inept, at best, and criminally negligent, at worst.
- The length of time required to bring full resolution to the issue will be extended, often dramatically.

The basic steps of effective crisis communications are not difficult, but they require advance work in order to minimize damage. The slower the response, the more damage is incurred. So if you're serious about crisis preparedness and response, read and implement these 10 steps of crisis communications, the first seven of which can and should be undertaken before any crisis occurs.

The 10 Steps of Crisis Communications

PRE-CRISIS

1. Anticipate Crises

If you're being proactive and preparing for crises, gather your Crisis Communications Team for intensive brainstorming sessions on all the potential crises that could occur at your organization.

There are at least two immediate benefits to this exercise:

- You may realize that some of the situations are preventable by simply modifying existing methods of operation.
- You can begin to think about possible responses, about best-case/worst-case scenarios, etc. Better now than when under the pressure of an actual crisis.

In some cases, of course, you know a crisis will occur because you're planning to create it — e.g., to lay off employees, or to make a major acquisition.

There is a more formal method of gathering this information I call a "vulnerability audit," about whichinformation is available here.

This assessment process should lead to creating a Crisis Response Plan that is an exact fit for your organization, one that includes both operational and communications components. The remaining steps, below, outline some of the major topics that should be addressed in the communications section of the plan.

2. Identify Your Crisis Communications Team

A small team of senior executives should be identified to serve as your organization's Crisis Communications Team. Ideally, the organization's CEO will lead the team, with the firm's top public relations executive and legal counsel as his or her chief advisers. If your in-house PR executive does not have sufficient crisis communications expertise, he or she may choose to retain an agency or independent consultant with that specialty. Other team members are typically the heads of your major organizational divisions, as any situation that rises to the level of being a crisis will affect your entire organization. And sometimes, the team also needs to include those with special knowledge related to the current crisis, e.g., subject-specific experts.

Let me say a word about legal counsel. During a crisis, a natural conflict can arise between the recommendations of the organization's legal counsel on the one hand, and those of the public relations counsel on the other. While it may be legally prudent not to say anything, this kind of reaction can land the organization in public relations "hot water" that is potentially as damaging, or even more damaging, than any financial or legal ramification. Fortunately, more and more legal advisors are becoming aware of this fact and are working in close cooperation with public relations counsel. The importance of this understanding cannot be underestimated. The court of public opinion drove Arthur Anderson, once the most-respected international accounting firm in the world, out of business, not a court of law. The incomes of a number of major celebrities suffered huge losses when sponsors abandoned them due to negative publicity. Entire countries have had their ambitions thwarted – or aided – as a consequence of their trials in the court of public opinion.

3. Identify and Train Spokespersons

Categorically, any organization should ensure, via an appropriate policy and training, that only authorized spokespersons speak for it, and this is particularly important during a crisis. Each crisis communications team should have people who have been pre-screened, and trained, to be the lead and/or backup spokespersons for different channels of communications.

All organizational spokespersons during a crisis situation must have:

- The right skills
- The right position
- The right training

The Right Skills

I've met senior-level corporate executives who could stand up in front of a 1,000-person conference audience without a fear and perform beautifully – but who would get virtual lockjaw when they knew a video camera was pointed their way for a one-on-one interview.

I've also known very effective written communicators who should probably never do spoken interviews because they're way too likely to "step in it" using that format.

Matching a potential spokesperson's skills with his/her assignments as a member of the Crisis Communications Team is critical.

The Right Position

Some spokespersons may naturally excel at all forms of crisis communications – traditional media, social media, B2B, internal, etc. Others may be more limited. Only certain types of highly sensitive crises (e.g., ones involving significant loss of life) virtually mandate the chief executive be the lead spokesperson *unless there is very good cause to the contrary*.

The fact is that some chief executives are brilliant organizational leaders but not very effective in-person communicators. The decision about who should speak is made after a crisis breaks – but the pool of potential spokespersons should be identified and trained in advance.

Not only are spokespersons needed for media communications, but for all types and forms of communications, internal and external, including on-camera, at a public meeting, at employee meetings, etc. You really don't want to be making decisions about so many different types of spokespersons while "under fire."

4. Spokesperson Training

Two typical quotes from well-intentioned organization executives summarize the reason why your spokespersons should receive professional training in how to speak to the media:

"I talked to that nice reporter for over an hour and he didn't use the most important news about my organization."

"I've done a lot of public speaking. I won't have any trouble at that public hearing."

Regarding the first example, there have hundreds of people skewered by CBS' "60 Minutes" or ABC's "20/20″ who thought they knew how to talk to the press. In the second case, most executives who have attended a hostile public hearing have gone home wishing they had been wearing a pair of Depends. They didn't learn, in advance, the critical differences between proactive PR, which focuses on promoting your organization, and crisis communications, which focus on preserving your organization.

All stakeholders, internal and external, are just as capable of misunderstanding or misinterpreting information about your organization as the media, and it's your responsibility to minimize the chance of that happening.

Spokesperson training teaches you to be prepared, to be ready to respond in a way that optimizes the response of all stakeholders.

5. Establish Notification and Monitoring Systems

Notification Systems

Remember when the only way to reach someone quickly was by a single phone or fax number, assuming they were there to receive either?

Today, we have to have – immediately at hand – the means to reach our internal and external stakeholders using multiple modalities. Many of us have several phone numbers, more than one email address, and can receive SMS (text) messages or faxes. Instant Messenger programs, either public or proprietary, are also very popular for business and personal use. We can even send audio and video messages via email. And then, of course, there is social media. This may be the best/fastest way to reach some of our stakeholders, but setting up social media accounts for this purpose and developing a number of followers/friends/contacts on the various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+) is not something you can do ***after*** a crisis breaks, because nowhere does news of a crisis spread faster and more out of your control than on social media.

Depending on how “techie” we choose to be, all of this type of communication – and more – may be received on or sent by a single device!

It is absolutely essential, pre-crisis, to establish notification systems that will allow you to rapidly reach your stakeholders using multiple modalities. The Virginia Tech campus shooting catastrophe, where email was the sole means of alerting students initially, proves that using any single modality can make a crisis worse. Some of us may be on email constantly, others not so. Some of us receive our cellphone calls or messages quickly, some not. If you use more than one modality to reach your stakeholders, the chances are much greater that the message will go through.

For a long time, those of us in crisis management relied on the old-fashioned “phone tree” and teams of callers to track people down. Fortunately, today there is technology – offered by multiple vendors for rent or purchase – that can be set up to automatically start contacting all stakeholders in your pre-established database and keep trying to reach them until they confirm (e.g., by pressing a certain number on a phone keypad) that the message has been received. Technology you can trigger with a single call or email.

Monitoring Systems

Intelligence gathering is an essential component of both crisis prevention and crisis response.

Knowing what's being said about you on social media, in traditional media, by your employees, customers, and other stakeholders often allows you to catch a negative "trend" that, if unchecked, turns into a crisis.

Likewise, monitoring feedback from all stakeholders during a crisis situation allows you to accurately adapt your strategy and tactics

Both require monitoring systems be established in advance. For traditional and social media, Google Alerts are the no-cost favorite. There a variety of paid monitoring services that provide not only monitoring, but also the ability to report results in a number of formats useful to planners. Monitoring other stakeholders means training personnel who have front-line contact with stakeholders (e.g., Customer Service) to report what they're hearing or seeing to decision-makers on your Crisis Communications Team.

6. Identify and Know Your Stakeholders

Who are the internal and external stakeholders that matter to your organization? I consider employees to be your most important audience, because *every employee is a PR representative and crisis manager for your organization whether you want them to be or not!* But, ultimately, all stakeholders will be talking about you to others not on your contact list, so it's up to you to ensure that they receive the messages you would like them to repeat elsewhere.

7. Develop Holding Statements

While full message development must await the outbreak of an actual crisis, "holding statements," messages designed for use immediately after a crisis breaks, can be developed in advance to be used for a wide variety of scenarios to which the organization is perceived to be vulnerable, based on the assessment you conducted in Step 1 of this process. An example of holding statements by a hotel chain with properties hit by a natural disaster, before the organization headquarters has any hard factual information, might be:

"We have implemented our crisis response plan, which places the highest priority on the health and safety of our guests and staff."

"Our hearts and minds are with those who are 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."

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

POST-CRISIS

8. Assess the Crisis Situation

Reacting without adequate information is a classic "shoot first and ask questions afterwards" situation in which you could be the primary victim. However, if you've done all of the above first, it's a "simple" matter of having the Crisis Communications Team on the receiving end of information coming in from your team members, ensuring the right type of information is being provided so you can proceed with determining the appropriate response.

Assessing the crisis situation is, therefore, the first crisis communications step you can't take in advance. If you haven't prepared in advance, your reaction will be delayed by the time it takes your in-house staff or quickly hired consultants to run through steps 1 to 7. Furthermore, a hastily created crisis communications strategy and team are never as efficient as those planned and rehearsed in advance.

9. Finalize and Adapt Key Messages

With holding statements available as a starting point, the Crisis Communications Team must continue developing the crisis-specific messages required for any given situation. The team already knows, categorically, what type of information its stakeholders are looking for. What should those stakeholders know about *this* crisis? Keep it simple. Have no more than three main messages that go to all stakeholders and, as necessary, some audience-specific messages for individual groups of stakeholders.

10. Post-Crisis Analysis

After the fecal matter is no longer interacting with the rotating blades, the question must be asked, "What did we learn from this?"

A formal analysis of what was done right, what was done wrong, what could be done better next time and how to improve various elements of crisis preparedness is another must-do activity for any Crisis

Communications Team. I have developed a formal process for accomplishing this, but even a solid in-house brainstorming session can do the job.

“It Can’t Happen To Us”

When a healthy organization’s CEO or CFO looks at the cost of preparing a crisis communications plan, either a heavy investment of in-house time or retention of an outside professional for a substantial fee, it is tempting for them to fantasize “it can’t happen to us” or “if it happens to us, we can handle it relatively easily.”

Hopefully, that type of ostrich emulation is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Yet I know when all is said and done, thousands of organizations hit by natural and man-made disasters will have suffered far more damage than would have occurred with a fully developed crisis communications plan in place. This has also been painfully true for scores of clients I have served over the past 30+ years. Even the best crisis management professional is playing catch up – with more damage occurring all the time – when the organization has no crisis communications infrastructure already in place.

The Last Word – For Now

I would like to believe organizations worldwide are finally “getting it” about crisis preparedness, whether we’re talking about crisis communications, disaster response or business continuity. Certainly, client demand for advance preparation has increased dramatically in the past half-decade, at least for my consultancy. But I fear there is, in fact, little change in what I have said in the past – that 95 percent of American organizations remain either completely unprepared or significantly under-prepared for crises. And my colleagues overseas report little better, and sometimes worse statistics.

Choose to be part of the prepared minority. Your stakeholders will appreciate it!