



Crisis Communication Planning

THE HARRELSON
CENTER

*Prepared for Harrelson Center
Partners and Associate Partners*

A crisis can strike at any time. We think of hurricanes and natural disasters, but crises are not limited to Acts of God. *Consider:* rumors of financial mismanagement, a sexual assault allegation, a data breach that reveals confidential donor information, or a ransomware attack that shuts down your website. Any of these would derail operations as you work to steady the ship and restore confidence.

A big part of that work will be devoted to communications.

How you communicate to your employees, board members, donors, clients, partners, government and law enforcement (if it comes to that), will have critical consequences as to how you emerge: reputation intact or damaged and needing urgent repair.

What follows is an outline of facets to consider. This document is only intended to shed light on the need for focused planning. It isn't a substitute for that plan.

READ BEFORE FILING!

Plan Ahead

Create a list of potential crisis scenarios and then carry through considering and identifying the various aspects of planning that should follow. Such contingency planning is time-consuming and painstaking, which is why many organizations don't do this. However, when faced with a crisis, these plans will save critical time and resources. It's smart business to have an action plan on hand that can be quickly implemented by every member of your team. Too much? Read on and consider at least developing a framework that you can rely on when a crisis hits.

Consider all facets of your operations – beyond those listed here -- that will be affected by each crisis. Consider from both an internal and external perspective. Designate a point person for each:

- Safety
- Operations
- Security
- Financial
- Legal
- Human Resources
- Communications

The remainder of this document is dedicated to this last bullet item only – **communications.**

Speed Is Key

It is critical to acknowledge crisis situations immediately.



You may not have all the details for days, or even weeks, but a prompt announcement to the media and your key publics will

- (a) minimize speculation and rumor and
- (b) let audiences know you are in control.

Be Responsibly Transparent and Authentic

Be up front.

Take responsibility.

Tell the truth.

Never engage in cover-up, deceit, or unethical behavior of any kind.



Remember that bad behavior will always find its way to the headlines – eventually.

Taking responsibility also takes the fire out of those who would seek to pile-on and use your disadvantage as their opportunity. By taking responsibility and telling the truth, you curb others' tendency, perhaps their ability, to blame and assign malfeasance.

Determine key audiences and appropriate communication approach

Understand the various audiences who will need to be informed, how frequently they will need updates and how best to stay in touch with each. These lists should be updated annually, with contact information re-confirmed.

- Employees and Spokesperson (w/understanding as to what is sharable and what is not)
- Board members
- Clients
- Volunteers
- Other partners in business (ie suppliers)
- Government/Emergency response
- Media

Develop overriding key messages appropriate for each audience. Update these key message as crisis unfolds. Continuity in language with each audience is important.

With each audience, determine what information they need to hear (not everyone needs the same updates), what is the best channel for reaching each audience (social media, email, texts, personal phone calls), and how frequently each needs updates.

Think: Who, What, How, When?

Monitor, Monitor, Monitor

Keep someone assigned on social channels to refresh with updated posts, to respond to questions and to put out rumors. If necessary, provide an expectation for timely updates -- and stick to it! Be proactive on each channel as warranted.

Also **Be Defensive,**
look for misinformation.



If a crisis warrants, create a website tab with updated press releases, fact sheets, visuals and contact info.

Designate point people to monitor traditional media/news coverage, and correct inaccuracies immediately.

Make sure the phone system is also monitored, with messages logged and questions addressed appropriately.

Likewise with the general inquiry email address and that of other key points of "entry." If your website invites general inquiries, make sure that portal is also monitored, or temporarily shut down.

Update Facts Regularly

Maintain an up-to-date timeline as crisis unfolds. What is learned, when was it learned, what is the source of information and their contact info. Maintain/update key facts and names of those to whom these facts can be attributed. Designate internal FAQs and external FAQs. Make sure everyone knows the difference.

Is a Holding Statement necessary?

If so, it should always include:

- A factual headline
- The date and time
- The location of the incident
- Basic details that have been confirmed
- When the company was made aware of the issue
- Actions your organization is taking that you are willing to make public
- An expression of compassion or empathy (if appropriate)
- Contact details OR details on when updates may occur

It should never include:

- Details that are unconfirmed or uncertain
- Any kind of speculation
- A response to unsubstantiated rumors
- Statements of blame or finger-pointing
- Names of victims in the case of death

Equally important: what is unknown, what information is still being determined, and a timeframe for that information if it can be reasonably met.

Spokesperson Training

Only one spokesperson should be designated during a crisis so as to avoid contradicting statements.

Training and retraining is critical. Always refresh messaging and keep updated. Understand what to share and when, based on all of the above.



Review

Review the plan every six months with key staff. Update audience assessment with who's priority and what are influencing currents?

Update essential contacts every year.

After a crisis, have a concentrated debrief with staff/board/clients and candidly assess strengths and weaknesses in execution.