

Best-Practice Guide to Crisis Communication and Collaboration: Strategies and Digital Tools



Communication key to crisis response and critical event management

Crises often become infamous when communication with and between stakeholders goes awry. Indeed, this has been the case in many of the most notorious reputational crises of the last few decades.

But what is crisis communication?

As a discipline, crisis communication emerged out of the field of Applied Communicationⁱ. Within that field, largely devoted to studying social problems, crisis communication deals with mediated messages to various stakeholders at moments of heightened pressure.

Crisis communication, from there, has evolved to where it stands today in incident and critical event management, consisting primarily of the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a given crisis (Page Center Training, Penn State).

Of course, it endures as a topic of interest because it's so easy to get crisis communication wrong during periods of acute stress.

Challenges to effective crisis communication

We need only read analysis of real-world critical events detailing the myriad challenges inherent to communicating during a crisis.

Synthesizing that researchⁱⁱ, the most significant problem areas emerge as (1) limited situational awareness, (2) clogged communication paths, (3) poor communication forms and content, and (4) lack of a common ground.

How does each manifest itself during critical events? Communication problems can take the following forms:

- 1 Lack of situational awareness.** Results from inability to communicate long and short-term goals, functions, capacity, and resources. Uncertainty and worry can result from resources arriving as a surprise – or not arriving at all. Here, dynamic information central to the task at hand isn't relayed due to communication problems.
- 2 Clogged communication pathways.** Occurs when information is relayed but problems arise with finding the right person to contact. Here, information gets “stuck.” Staff might become overloaded with information of unclear provenance; and/or informal communication paths form, but often hinder the cohesion of the operation. Researchers have found that it's often a lack of practice in informing others about own activities that clog communication pathways.
- 3 Poor communication forms and content.** Similarly, time-consuming and ineffective forms of communication can also bog down operations. For instance, when adequate documentation is lacking, the hand-over of roles becomes more laborious, as it is unclear what information other actors need.
- 4 Lack of a common ground.** When multiple parties are involved in crisis response, different opinions and ideas about fundamental concepts often occur. This results from the different communication styles of different organizations. Staff rotation might also affect communication since it takes time for people to get to know each other.

The three stages of the crisis communication lifecycle

Despite the challenges, effective communication during a crisis can be done.

Indeed, the lifecycle of crisis communication helps to ensure the right messages go to relevant audiences during critical events. What are the stages of this lifecycle?

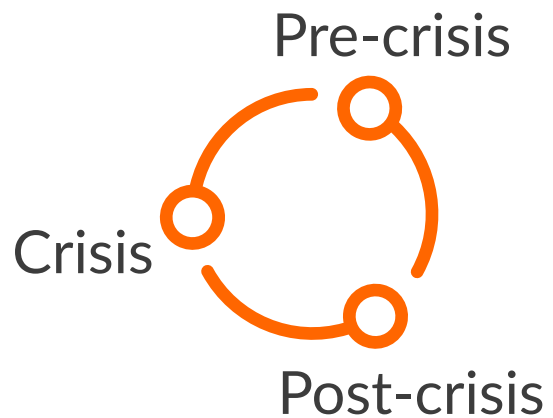
They follow below:

Three stages of the crisis communication lifecycle		
Pre-crisis	Crisis	Post-crisis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor crisis risks • Make decisions about how to manage potential crises • Train people who will be involved in the crisis management process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect and process information for crisis team decision making • Create and disseminate crisis messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the crisis management effort • Provide follow-up crisis messages as needed

Source: Page Center Training, Penn State.

Of course, effective crisis communication takes more than understanding the crisis communication lifecycle. It will also require senior leaders to recognize the criticality of knowledge and information as assets to the organization.

According to international best practice, crisis leadership must do its part to demonstrate the criticality of such assets by making that information more accessible (where appropriate), understandable, and supportive of the organization's larger resilience objectives.



What goes into the crisis communication plan?

The traditional mode of doing so is collating relevant information and knowledge assets into the crisis communication plan. This plan constitutes a set of guidelines and activities used to prepare an organization for the knowledge-sharing aspects of an unexpected event.

What steps go into building a best-practice crisis communication plan? Key steps include:

Step 1. Understand the plan's purpose and scope.

Before putting pen to paper on the crisis communications plan, organizations should first consider critical factors, including the plan's purpose and its scope. Organization must lay out what they are trying to accomplish with the plan and what material will be covered in it.

Beyond that, the planning process should also help organizations determine which audiences they are likeliest to communicate with during a crisis. Relevant audiences are likely to include:

- 
Internal employees and families

 - Senior management
 - Crisis response team and other frontline responders
 - All staff
- 
Customers
- 
News media
- 
Policymakers and regulators
- 
Suppliers and other partners
- 
The community

As to the form they take, communications plans shouldn't be treated as standalone plans. Rather, they serve as important supplements (or annexes) to other incident plans and are only activated when the incident in question necessitates communicating.

Organizations must, therefore, consider the kinds of incidents that typically trigger the need to communicate with the public. Examples, here, might include:

-  Public health crises
-  Active shooters
-  Natural disaster
-  Cyber incident
-  Civil unrest
-  Toxic material releases
-  Workplace violence







And as for the plan itself, it will serve the following functions: (1) outline the protocols to follow in the event of an incident, (2) define the roles and responsibilities of team members, and (3) provide clear action plans for teams to execute.

Step 2. Nail down roles and responsibilities.

Key to successful crisis resolution is chain and unity of command. Even in the case of communication during a crisis, organizations must clarify reporting relationships to eliminate confusion and ensure that everyone is able to control the actions of personnel under their supervision.

In crisis management in business communication, the CEO will typically emerge as the premier company spokesperson. Other organizations, however, might tap other stakeholders to serve in the de facto Public Information Officer (PIO) role.

Per best-practice, responsibilities for this PIO role include:

-  Verify, coordinate, and disseminate accurate, accessible, and timely information on the incident's cause, size, and current situation, for both internal and external use
-  Gather information about the incident, e.g., from Incident Command Centre and response teams
-  Gather information related to the type of incident from professional sources, such as response agencies, technical specialists, and emergency response guidebooks
-  Verify the accuracy of the information gathered by consulting with the Crisis Chair, other Crisis team members, response agencies, and/or technical specialists
-  Coordinate dissemination of information internally to response teams and related resources
-  Coordinate dissemination of information externally to key stakeholders, media, and the public

Step 3. Invest in the right technology.

Communication plans don't just execute themselves even with the best people. Crisis management technology will be needed to establish a process for gathering, analyzing, sharing, and managing crisis-related information and intelligence. Generic capabilities to consider when procuring such platforms include:

-  **Rapid plan and team activation.** Leverage pre-configured crisis playbooks and checklists to allow quick activation and dispatch of your crisis response teams. Automate and track task allocation to ensure everyone knows what to do so you can restore normal operations ASAP.
-  **Easily communicate and share information.** Built-in communication and collaboration tools like chat, email, SMS, and voice messages make it easy to work in real time with your team, to better coordinate your response and keep everyone informed.
-  **A central location for incidents.** Monitor and generate crisis response tasks, as well as log and share updates, decisions, facts, and assumptions. Produce situation reports and save time briefing stakeholders on the latest.

Further crisis communications planning considerations

- **Messaging.** Internal and external messaging must be carefully considered. To this end, organizations must agree on and deliver shared, consistent messaging that resonates with the audience and aligns with the organization's broader communications goals and objectives.
- **Reputation.** What information is shared— and with whom — will depend on many factors, including the expected harm or damage, regulatory compliance and reporting requirements, and cost efficiency. How and when information is disclosed, and how organizations handle the situation from a communications perspective, will ultimately affect the organization's reputation in the industry and community.
- **Stakeholder management.** Transparency and honesty are critical in the event of an incident. Organizations should strive to be as transparent as possible with constituents and be honest about what is known versus unknown at any given time. That is because rumors can spread quickly, both internally and externally. Transparency and messaging to maintain control of the situation and respond and recover effectively will be needed to combat these rumors before the gain larger purchase with relevant audiences.
- **Accuracy and timeliness.** Communicate often and regularly throughout the lifecycle of an incident, both internally and externally. Any information disclosed during an incident, however, must be accurate and timely. The timeliness of notifications is critical to stakeholder communication and management. It is also important to stick to the facts versus speculation; accuracy of the information will influence stakeholder confidence and organizational reputation.

Source: A Guide to Effective Incident Management Communications, Carnegie Mellon University

Digital capabilities to mitigate key crisis communication challenges

However, digital critical event management technologies should only be procured if they are purpose-built to manage complex communications.

What does that look like? Organizations should be enabled to use a single system to centralize, approve, standardize, and manages their crisis communications. Only such a solution provides effective communication pathways for all aspects of crisis and incident management.

What to look for, specifically? Consider the following capabilities:



Send email, SMS, voice, and app push notifications to people, groups, or roles



Include message response links in email or SMS, and audible response prompts in voice messages, to capture responses from recipients



Define message templates, with dynamic content populated from a related event or other data



Include links back to objects in the system in your message content



System inbox to receive email messages



Automate messages, notifications, and responses using dedicated workflows



Relate messages to events, assets, or other objects, to form part of that record and include in timelines



Define system email addresses to organize communications according to business areas and manage who can view and respond to certain communications

Key use cases supported	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Message template designer. Standardize and speed up your email, SMS and voice communications using message templates, with dynamic inserts of event information or other data. • Message reporting. Easily monitor inbound and outbound communications and responses from recipients, with quick access to events, assets, or other objects related to a message. • Simplify communication processes. Automate messages, notifications, and responses using workflows and automatically escalate communications based on incident severity. • Stay informed from anywhere, on any device. Take your responsibilities to go and respond to incident notifications, task assignments, and updates; or create, edit, and send messages directly from your dedicated, mobile crisis management app. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quickly inform, collaborate, and share information in real-time using chat, email, SMS, voice, and app push messages • Standardize and speed up communications using message templates with dynamic inserts of event information or other data • Relate messages to events, assets, or other objects, to form part of that record and include in timelines • Include message response links in email or SMS, and audible response prompts in voice messages, to capture responses from recipients • Include links back to objects in the system in your message content • Define system email addresses to organize your communications according to your business areas and manage who can view and respond to certain communications • Segment and organize your contacts into groups for targeted communications • Monitor inbound and outbound incident communications and responses • Automatically escalate communications based on incident severity

Finally, crisis communication planning is easy to put off until it's too late. Senior leaders, as such, must marshal the necessary resources to develop, maintain, test, and periodically update crisis communication plans as part of the broader critical event management practice.

Indeed, the plan itself helps organizations save time during a crisis, where they will be focused on execution, rather than deciding what to do.

Done well, though, crisis communication can immeasurably help organizations better understand the root causes of crisis as well as protect reputation and brand value by imparting relevant information to important stakeholders in as seamless a manner as possible.



Sources

- i. Mike Allen, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods: Applied Communication*. Available at <https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-communication-research-methods/i1796.xml#:~:text=Applied%20communication%20is%20communication%20scholarship,to%20address%20the%20social%20issue.&text=Applied%20communication%20is%20g-rounded%20in,a%20focus%20on%20theory%20building>.
- ii. Jonas Lundberg and Mikael Asplund, *Communication Problems in Crisis Response: Linköping University*: Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228744557_Communication_Problems_in_Crisis_Response.



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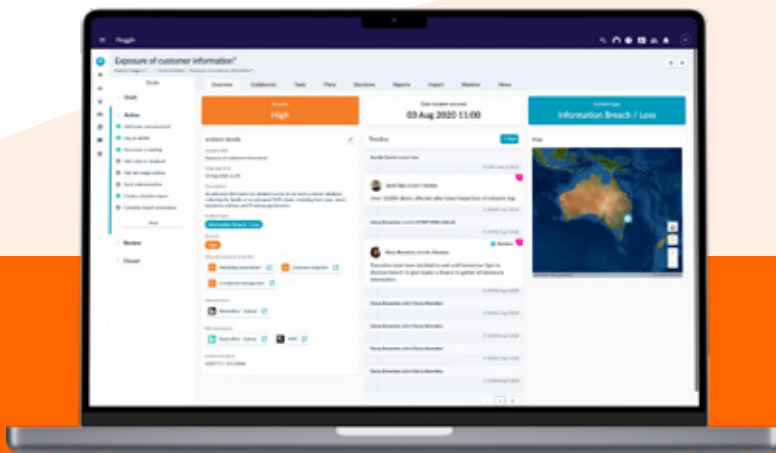
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