

Communicating in Crisis

Twenty-five lessons learned



Crises can be initiated by any number of things, from a power outage caused by nearby construction to a devastating and life-threatening natural disaster. Although a crisis from a public health threat, on the surface, seems very different than a technology failure or a criminal act, they all share the same capacity to cause disruption and confusion. When there is disruption and confusion, communication is key.

To mitigate disruption and confusion, an organization's response to the event must be swift, and communication with stakeholders must be clear and ongoing until the situation is resolved. This brief uses lessons learned from a wide variety of business interruptions to help you plan today for the disruptive events of tomorrow.

Twenty-five Lessons:

1. Crises generate volumes of inquiries from a variety of stakeholders.

When your organization experiences a crisis, whether man-made or natural, you can expect a barrage of questions. The volume of inquiries will often overwhelm both your team's expectations and ability to respond. Questions will come from those directly involved in the event, their families and friends, the press, regulators, shareholders, business partners and others. Your business needs to provide answers before someone else does, because let's face it—in today's world of social media, any event, no matter how small, can quickly become big.

2. In a major crisis, be prepared for telecommunications challenges.

With events that impact a geographic area outside the walls of your company, the telecommunications infrastructure (Internet, phone, SMS, etc.) can also be impacted, creating challenges very different than normal day-to-day operations. In your planning, assume that many of the usual methods of communication may be closed to you and consider alternatives. In some cases phone lines will be down but SMS texting will still work; be prepared to adjust your communication plan with the reality of the situation. Prepare ahead by considering how you would get the word out if the power were out, the Internet inaccessible, etc.

3. Be prepared to use every communication channel available.

When planning, consider every possible modality for sending and receiving messages. Practice those modalities before an event tests your communication plan. Many people rely on SMS during regional events, but it has limitations that may not make it the best choice. SMS is designed to work

Communicating in Crisis

Twenty-five lessons learned



for smaller messages (the character count is determined by your carrier) so it is unsuitable when there is a lot of information to share. If SMS messages are longer than the carrier character limit, they will be truncated, or broken into multiple messages that may be delivered randomly. Recognize that some of your audience will be more likely to read a text while others are more likely to pay attention if the message comes by voicemail. Prepare to communicate through any modality your recipients may rely on, like the Web, your intranet, social media, voicemail, SMS, etc. If many of your employees are accustomed to receiving information via email, be sure to use email as one of your communication methods (but not your only one).

4. Have a plan to communicate with employees post-disaster.

A critical piece of any business continuity plan is how to deliver emergency notifications. When sending out notifications, communicate with your internal people first, and keep them informed regularly to engender trust and show you care. Use message mapping and consider your organization's key values in everything you convey, and remember that many of your staff will be sharing the information you share more widely. Since many employees will first approach their manager with questions, make sure all managers are fully and frequently briefed.

5. Know that families will expect your organization to provide timely information and account for their loved ones who may have been affected by a crisis.

After disasters like the 9/11 terrorist attacks and hurricane Katrina, families expected businesses to know what was going on with their loved ones. Many were disappointed that companies really knew nothing and could do nothing but log their calls, adding to the list of those missing. Companies today know that they can make better use of technology to answer those questions, many by simply using technology that was already in place. Consider what you are using to track employees right now; do they gain access with an electronic badge, time cards or by signing in? All of these can contribute to a knowledgebase to discover who may be in the danger zone.

6. Be proactive.

In critical situations, if you have contact information for employees and families, reach out to them right away rather than wait for them to call you. Use the contact info you have on file, and if you don't yet have that information, take steps to get it. Even if you don't have much information to share, let family members know that when you have it, you will share it.

7. Provide accurate information.

Share everything you are sure of, and let people know what you don't know. With social media broadcasting news within seconds, you won't have much time to prepare, but share the information you gather from reliable sources and follow threads to get more. If emergency responders tell you they have taken a specific number of victims to two hospitals, you can share that fact. You can then

Communicating in Crisis

Twenty-five lessons learned



call those hospitals for more information. By developing contacts in the fire department, police department, etc., ahead of time, you can call on those contacts for reliable information.

8. Disseminate accurate information as quickly as possible.

Once you have accurate information, get a message out as quickly as possible. Be prepared with outlines of potential situations and pre-built messages that you can adapt to respond to each situation; following a traditional message map is a good start. If you've done a proper risk assessment, you'll be one step ahead. Plan and train ahead of time so that your decision makers will work in sync to release information without delay.

9. Share what you know quickly; don't withhold information while you wait for all the facts.

Although you want to share only accurate information, you shouldn't wait until all the facts are in before you start communicating. People will appreciate it if you pass information along whenever you have it, especially if you hold to the promise of keeping the information coming. Information is power, and by sharing it you empower people and gain their trust.

10. Be consistent in your messaging.

It's important that everyone hears the same message, over and over. While content and details might vary between the information provided internally versus externally, the basic message needs to remain consistent. When inquiries come in, they'll go to people at every level of the organization and to keep confusion at bay, you must keep your responses consistent. By designating specific spokespeople it's easier to share a common message throughout the company and with external contacts. If the message stays consistent you're also less likely to over-communicate, as often happens when people share rumors and conjecture.

11. Know you won't have all information right away.

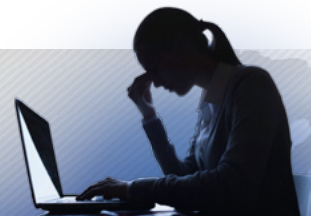
Be aware that the information you get in the first 24 hours after a crisis is often inaccurate or has the wrong emphasis. It's better to say that you don't have all the information at this time, but when you do, you will share it. As you deliver more information as the crisis unfolds, you can also establish your spokesperson as the reliable authority for everyone to go to in order to help control your message.

12. Have a secure, centralized location for up-to-date information to be stored.

Since people will be in various locations when dealing with the ramifications of an event, you should provide a portal or bulletin board that key personnel can access. Make sure you have a way to pull key players into a conference call, and consider that they will not only be

Communicating in Crisis

Twenty-five lessons learned



in different locations but different time zones as well. See that decision makers are in close communication and all know what has been announced and what is yet to be announced.

13. Difficult news must be delivered personally.

If the news is not good, make the effort to say it either in person or on the telephone—don't text it. Realizing you have to use the tools and contact information you have, do your best to connect on a personal level, no matter how challenging, when you must deliver bad news. In such cases it makes sense to choose your messenger carefully.

14. Prepare the staff that interfaces with victims and families for a range of reactions.

Train any staff that might deliver difficult news to victims and their families so they're prepared for the wide range of reactions that can occur. Just as important, identify and train staff that will speak to the press. These should be individuals at a high enough level in the organization to convey authority to make an impact and they should have high level of restraint and emotional intelligence. Don't hesitate to make it clear that certain individuals must not speak in these situations.

15. Listen and express empathy.

The person who delivers difficult news must remain calm and show restraint; their job is to listen and be present, not to offer advice or solutions. It's okay to say you're sorry for what happened and to connect with the people you are talking to with compassion.

16. Use open-ended questions to establish rapport.

After you deliver your message, encourage the person or people to talk and share their feelings. They will feel better if you let them do the talking and in the process, you may find ways that you can help.

17. Find out what they need.

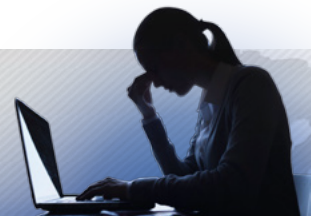
Rather than asking if you can help, ask what they need. You may not be able to help them directly but may know how to find help for them.

18. Recognize which statements are helpful, and which are not.

When delivering difficult news, refrain from statements like: "I know how you feel" or "It will be okay." It's better to express your sorrow, say you can't imagine how difficult this must be for them, and ask what they need at this time. Know that every crisis truly is unique and thus every reaction is valid for the time, place and circumstances.

Communicating in Crisis

Twenty-five lessons learned



19. Family members will not remember exactly what you say... but they will remember how you said it, and how it made them feel.

Take time in delivering your message, be present, show compassion and stay as needed. Your actions will show you care and reflect well on your organization.

20. Speak slowly and clearly.

Make an effort to speak slowly and use familiar language and terms. Avoid acronyms and jargon; speak naturally.

21. Be prepared to repeat information.

Realize that it's difficult to take in bad news; people often don't grasp traumatic information the first, second or even third time. Sometimes you have to say the same thing, calmly, over and over.

22. Set a follow-up plan to touch base regularly and then stick to that plan.

It's important that there is a plan for following up after delivering bad news in the wake of a crisis. Think of this as a series of steps to get to closure in some future time. Commit to taking those steps and communicate that clearly.

23. Understand the importance of self-care for those involved in responding to the incident.

The people on the front lines of responding and reaching out in a crisis can quickly become exhausted. Take steps to see that your teams eat regularly, take rest and go home at the end of shift rather than working till a situation calms down. Know that they also have to take care of their own families and will have to find closure for themselves after getting involved in the lives of those impacted by the event.

24. Debrief those involved at the end of every shift.

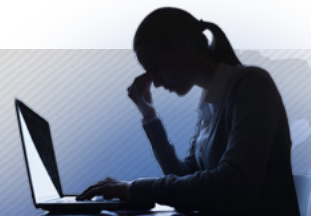
Make sure people take breaks, but find ways to maintain continuity of communication. Check in with staff and make sure they get a chance to speak before they leave for the day to share, relate and connect. This may be a struggle for some, but it is critical that they share what they have learned.

25. Know when to seek help.

A. Have a notification system in place to assist in communications. A good system can help you reach any number of people at once, by a wide range of modalities, and will allow recipients to respond with important information. You can also use an automated notification system to pull decision makers together quickly on a conference call and keep careful records of all messages delivered.

Communicating in Crisis

Twenty-five lessons learned



B. When a crisis is severe, be realistic about the capabilities of your team and have a backup plan of external resources in case you need support. A crisis call center can be assembled quickly and consists of people who have been carefully selected and trained to act as the face of your company in times of crisis. That way your people can focus on critical operations and other issues while other professionals handle the calls.

Q&A from webinar participants:

Q. Is there anything you shouldn't include in a crisis communication?

A. Yes, don't overwhelm people with too much information at once. Direct recipients to the proper resources where they can find what they need. This is especially important when you use SMS or other short message formats.

Q. How can I preempt delays that can come from internal politics?

A. Prepare and train your executives ahead of time so that this won't happen. Sometimes the reason for delay seems unassailable, as often is the case when a legal department wants to wait for more information, but when you show the damage that can be caused by delay, decision makers are more likely to reach agreement quickly.

Q. When sending out an Intelligent Notification (MIR3) via SMS that has 1000 characters, will the message break up in three or four text messages? If so, will they arrive in order, one after the other, or simultaneously? Is there a chance one part could be delivered later than the others?

A. With SMS, it's your carrier that controls both the maximum message size and how messages exceeding that size are processed, not your notification system. Typically SMS messages are limited to 180 characters, with larger messages either truncated or split into multiple messages. The sequence of those multiple messages is inconsistent, with some carriers processing them in sequence, beginning to end, and others sending them in random order.

Q. What are the key challenges for crisis leadership?

A. Key challenges:

- Making decisions under intense tension and stress
- Communication speed or insight velocity—the need to get meaningful information out quickly, while all agree to that information
- Personnel—critical decision makers may not be available to assist in the crisis
- The flexibility to adapt the organization to the situation
- Communicating with all stakeholders

Communicating in Crisis

Twenty-five lessons learned



Q. What are the critical steps for effective crisis communications training?

A. Critical steps:

- Anticipate all potential crises that can occur at your organization (perform a risk analysis)
- Identify your crisis communications team
- Identify and know how to reach your stakeholders
- Identify your spokespersons
- Develop holding, or standard, statements ahead of time that can be used for a wide variety of scenarios (these should reflect the values of your organization)
- Ensure your spokespersons receive specific training on how to speak to the media and have them role play

Q. If there is a catastrophic incident where there are staff casualties, does the company communicate this to next of kin, or is that left to police or other external authorities?

A. Technically, the coroner or medical examiner must deliver an official death notification. However, it's important that a representative of your organization is a part of the discussion as this shows that the organization cares.

Q. Is there such a thing as too much information in a notification?

A. In many cases, yes. The exception might be in an email where there is more room for detail; however, it's smart to keep the notification content short and refer the recipient to a maintained website for further information. Remember, SMS must be short (180 characters or less) and voice messages should be under one minute in duration (the receiver will have difficulty listening and remembering more, or will simply drop the call if the message is long). Remember, your recipients are potentially dealing with limited phone battery or power restrictions, possibly even cellular service; so keep messages as short as possible.

Q. How do you deal with misinformation/rumors being spread among the victims?

A. You can't control what others share with one another, but by sharing updates and information frequently, you can help negate those issues. It helps to clearly establish who the trusted authorities are within the company and to direct inquiries to those as the ones that are most informed (and see that those authorities always have the same accurate information).

Q. Does anyone actually use an ENS to notify family members of an event?

A. Yes, one prevalent use case is the delivery of a notification to family members for school closings.

Communicating in Crisis

Twenty-five lessons learned



Q. Isn't it better to say we don't have all the information at this time, but please stay tuned as we will release information as soon as available (suggesting we are the best source for accurate information)?

A. You are correct, and you can go even further by explaining how you will be sharing information and how frequently.

Q. What do you suggest for organizations that do not have internal resources to respond to a spike in inquiries following an event an outsourced call center, technology solution or something else?

A. When you have limited resources your best option is to combine both a messaging system and an external call center. The costs for such solutions are much less than trying to add additional resources internally, and these solutions are geared towards crisis management, which will enhance your response and help protect your brand and reputation.

In summary

You can't be prepared for every single potential crisis, but you can take steps right now to ensure that you and your staff can manage as well as can be expected. By sharing honest, clear, concise and accurate information with the right people and by a variety of modalities, you will show the intentions of your organization. By shaping every communication by your overall corporate or institutional messages and beliefs, you will stand the best possible chance of protecting your people, your resources, your reputation and your brand.

This paper is based on the webinar, *Communicating in Crisis: Twenty-five lessons learned*, presented by Ann Pickren, MBCI, crisis communication expert and president at OnSolve; Michelle Colosimo, crisis communication expert and director at Black Swan Solutions.

For more briefs and other helpful resources, visit: onsolve.com.



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OnSolve is the market leader in real-time, mass notification and collaboration solutions used by the world's largest organizations. The OnSolve suite of critical communication tools is a key component of effective business continuity, emergency response, IT alerting, and security programs around the globe.