

10 Tips for Communicating in a Crisis



Most cities and towns, regardless of location or size, have some sort of crisis management plan. But do you have a plan to address how you will communicate with your citizens and react to the news media when a natural or human-induced emergency occurs?

It's not enough just to know how evacuation routes flow, where shelters are located or where supplies are stored. You must also be prepared to share information quickly and accurately with both your citizens and the news media.

1 – Identify who is to be designated as the spokesman for your city or town.

This person needs to be readily accessible, well-spoken and knowledgeable. Ideally your chosen spokesman is not someone who would have another major role if disaster strikes (i.e. the fire or police chief). You may choose for more than one person to speak to the media during a crisis, but have all contact flow through one person to ensure accuracy. If you are the first person a reporter is likely to call, know how to get in touch with your city's designated spokesperson.

In most cases, when reporters call, it's not a "gotcha" story where they're trying to trick you into saying something or trying to embarrass the city you work for. The reporter is just trying to get correct, factual information from a person who knows what's going on. They call who they believe to be the expert, looking for help. This is especially true during crisis situations when it's chaotic and deadlines are shorter than usual. If you're not the expert, say so, then direct the reporter to the appropriate person.

2 – Anticipate problems.

In many cases, a situation becomes an emergency only because it wasn't anticipated. While it may seem like a waste of time to try and anticipate anything bad that can happen, investing this time will pay off in the long run. This is a senior leadership responsibility to get the organization to go through this exercise.

3 - Assemble and organize resources.

In a crisis situation you will want to have up-to-date and accessible information. Resource information may include current list of crisis team members and alternates with work and home telephone numbers; updated media lists; lists of emergency services such as fire, police, hospital and ambulance; and a means to communicate with volunteers and staff (fax lists or a telephone network).

Consider setting up a "phantom" Web page on your site that could immediately be turned into a crisis response page where a designated person could update information. Remember to take into consideration the fact that you might want to have this page duplicated on a server away from your office or City Hall. Also, you will want to be able to remotely update this site in case you can't get to the office.

Develop your talking points and outline of information that should be released. Bridge back to these points when answering questions.

Make sure someone is monitoring social media outlets to understand what mis-information may be circulating about the situation. Social media substantially speeds up the time it takes for bad information to travel.

4 - Communicate with employees.

The best policy, if possible, is to get information to people on your staff and council before, or at least at the same time, it is released to news media. If the situation warrants, call a staff meeting/telephone conference and provide appropriate information on the circumstances of the situation. Or, your plan may call for the use of a fax or telephone tree system.

5 - Communicate with the media.

Be proactive. In general, it is good policy to release information about the situation as quickly as possible. Comments should be of a general nature until all the facts are in, but then it is far better to get the full story out as soon as possible. Sometimes the media will be on the scene. In other situations you will need to initiate contact. This should be done as soon as the basic facts are in hand. The initial contact should be followed with a formal statement, including any updated information and plans for investigating the incident.

Reporters will expect complete honest information, background material, some indication of how the organization intends to proceed, information about the impact on your staff and citizens, regular updates and after-the-crisis follow up. If you are pulled into a national crisis, deal with local reporters first. They will still be there long after the national reporters have packed up and left.

6 - Be forthright in your comments, but avoid the use of "no comment" whenever possible.

When the public reads "no comment" in the newspaper or hears it on TV or radio, the natural assumption is the spokesman has something to hide. Try to have some comment, even if you can't give the whole story (see endnote on lawyers). Also, if you give a reporter nothing, he or she will likely work ten times harder to get around you to get the story which increases the chance of the reporter getting it wrong.

On the other side of the issue, however, never tell a reporter anything you are unwilling to see in print. "Off the record" is sometimes misunderstood and misused, so don't rely on it to protect you. The following may help you avoid "no comment" while you are in the process of information gathering.

- "We've just learned about the situation and are trying to get more complete information now."
- "All our efforts are directed at bringing the situation under control, so I'm not going to speculate on the cause of the incident."
- "I'm not the authority on that subject. Let me have our Mr. Jones call you right back."
- "We're preparing a statement on that now. Can I email it to you in about two hours?"

7 – Report your own bad news.

Don't allow another source or a social media outlet to inform the media first or start rumors. This is your first step toward losing control of the situation.

8 - Keep a log of media calls and return calls as promptly as possible.

A log can help you keep track of issues being raised by reporters, and give you a record of which media showed the most interest. Track social media hits too...Google doesn't forget. Know what's out there after the crisis is over.

9 - Do the right thing.

In any emergency situation it is imperative that you put the public interest first. Your first responsibility is to the safety and well being of the people involved. Once safety has been restored, face the public and face the facts. Never try to minimize a serious problem or "smooth it over" in the hopes that no one will notice. Conversely, don't blow minor incidents out of proportion or allow others to do so. Own the situation.

10 - Debrief.

After the crisis has passed, make sure to include your communications efforts in your debriefing activity. Think about whether your primary spokesperson was available and prepared. Did you need a better process for returning media calls? Were your channels of communication with the public adequate?

A word about lawyers and reporters in crisis situations:

Reporters - and the editors they work for - don't like mistakes in the paper or on TV. In fact, reporters' reputations are built on them being accurate and fair. In most news organizations, there's a lengthy process and a fair amount of paperwork involved when a reporter makes a mistake. If a reporter gets something wrong in print or on TV, call and ask for a correction -- just make sure you have your facts straight first. And make sure it's a fact, not a perception, you're asking them to correct.

Lawyers will almost always insist on "no comment" as the immediate response since legal issues often are involved in crises. City leadership must be willing to balance legal and public relations/reputation management issues. The long-term health of your city or town depends not only on a legal resolution of a specific issue, but also on the effective resolution of a crisis in the "court of public opinion."