RECOVERY HOUSING BEST PRACTICES

HOW TO COMMUNICATE IN A CRISIS

HELPFUL TIPS FROM THE FLETCHER GROUP RCOE

IT'S WISE TO PLAN AHEAD

Running a facility or program is not all smooth sailing. Crises are inevitable and the only way to ensure a positive outcome is to be prepared.

Having a step-by-step plan in place can help you and your team quickly answer critical questions such as:

- Who will speak on behalf of your organization?
- Who will issue an official statement?
- Who will oversee the creation and execution of a communication plan that includes guidance for staff, clients, and residents?

It's impossible to foresee the future. And no two crises are the same. But a detailed plan for handling them, as described on the following pages, will enable your organization to respond as wisely and effectively as possible.

A METHODOLOGY AND CHECKLIST

To help you respond effectively in a crisis

If you need more information than what appears here, feel free to call the Fletcher Group at 606-657-4662 or use our contact form at www.fletchergroup.org/contact/.

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THE FLETCHER GROUP
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Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Based on the breadth and depth of our hands-on experience and research, the Fletcher Group is confident in endorsing the following recommendations as being best practices.

Lesson 1: Form a Crisis Management Team

A crisis response team coordinates an organization's reaction and response to a crisis. The composition of the crisis response team will vary based on the size of the organization, the nature of the products or services it provides, the types of crises that are likely to impact the organization, and its prior experience responding to crisis situations.

In a larger organization with more a complex staffing pattern, the crisis response team may include multiple key department heads plus the Chief Executive Officer. In a smaller organization with few staff members, the crisis response team may be comprised of board members, a couple of staff, and outside professional advisors (who may either be paid or volunteers).

Lesson 2: Have a Plan

There are three stages of crisis management: (1) Pre-Crisis; (2) Crisis Response; and (3) Post-Crisis. Each of these have specific implications for developing and carrying out a crisis response.

PRE-CRISIS: Develop and practice ways to respond to various crisis scenarios.

- Identify risks and plan for ways to minimize those risks
- Define the short-term message based on the crisis
- Establish monitoring or early warning systems
- Develop a crisis response plan
- Identify who will act as a crisis manager

CRISIS RESPONSE: Execute the organization's crisis response plan.

- Convene crisis management team
- Crisis manager communicates with employees and the public

POST-CRISIS: Review, adjust and update response plan for the future.

- Crisis manager continues to meet with crisis management teams
- Review crisis response plan to evaluate and revise if needed

A STEP-BY-STEP CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

1. Gather the CEO, legal counsel, and communications support staff
2. Contact and work with law enforcement
3. Inform the Board of Directors
4. Prepare and distribute media statements
5. Connect with staff and volunteers

Crisis Management Plan Checklist

- Does your plan reflect your organization's mission and values?
- Do you have measures to identify crisis warning signs?
- Do you have contact information for all members of the crisis management team, as well as those for key advisors, stakeholders, and support services?
- Do your crisis scenarios represent a range of the most probable emergencies for your organization?
- Have you identified core response action elements?
- Have you mapped the response actions to the crisis scenarios?
- Have you planned for crisis communication?
- Is there a clear chain of command in the crisis team?
- Have you established a signal to communicate when a crisis has occurred and when the situation is all clear?
- Does your crisis plan include procedures for assessing the severity of an event and its impact?
- Have you included the training and plans that you need to update?
- Have you identified and set up a command center?
- Have you identified and obtained all necessary back-up resources?

The Six R's of Crisis Management

1. **Recognize:** Recognize and identify the issue. Mobilize the crisis response team. Have contact info available.
2. **Remove:** Provide tools for experts to use to eradicate the issue. Communicate with key audiences. Monitor and evaluate reactions by keeping an eye on social media and news outlets.
3. **Restrict:** Conduct a crisis response team call or meeting. If necessary, post a holding statement until a full statement is prepared. Communicate to critical audiences.
4. **Recover**: Implement business recovery plan. Draft a resolution statement.
5. **Resolve:** Alert audiences that the issue has been addressed. Follow up with affected parties.
6. **Refine:** Evaluate effectiveness of the crisis response team and response tactics. Update contact lists. Re-train the crisis response team.

Lesson 3: Choose the Right Spokesperson

An effective spokesperson has verbal and non-verbal communication skills, media literacy, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and crisis awareness. Spokespeople are adept at public speaking, media relations, crisis management, and possess subject matter expertise. Their credibility is affected by their role and authority, availability and accessibility, reputation, and rapport with the audience.

How to Prepare a Spokesperson

- *Before a crisis situation,* the prepared spokesperson will research and anticipate potential crises, develop and update key messages and talking points, practice and rehearse media interviews and public statements, and establish and maintain media contacts and networks.

- *During a crisis situation*, the spokesperson will monitor and assess the situation, update and adapt key messages and talking points, deliver clear, concise, and consistent information, and respond to media and public inquiries and feedback.

- *After a crisis situation*, a spokesperson's duties include evaluating and reviewing the communication performance, addressing any gaps or errors, and following up and maintaining communication with the media and the public.

Spokespersons shall show empathy and compassion, acknowledge the impact and emotions of the crisis, express concern and care, offer support and assistance, highlight positive actions and outcomes, and call for cooperation and collaboration.

How to Deal with Challenges When Communicating in a Crisis Situation

During a crisis situation, it is not uncommon to encounter hostile or aggressive media. These encounters can result in negative or biased coverage, release of misinformation or disinformation, rumors or speculation, or public anger or distrust.

Effectively responding to such situations begins with being prepared and proactive. Rather than ignoring or avoiding such challenges instead address them directly and respectfully while correcting inaccuracies or falsehoods.

In the spirit of collaboration, the spokesperson can provide the media with alternative or additional information, explain the reasons or context, acknowledge the limitations or uncertainties and emphasize shared communication goals.

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Lesson 4: Be Present

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

- First do no harm. Your words have consequences —be sure they are the right ones.
- Don't babble. Know what you want to say. Say it … then say it again if necessary.
- If you don't know what you're talking about, stop talking.
- Focus more on informing people than impressing them. Use everyday language.
- Never say anything you are not willing to see printed on tomorrow's front page.
- Never lie. You won't get away with it.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Don't get angry. When you argue with the media, you always lose … and lose publicly.
- Don't speculate, guess, or assume. When you don't know something, say so.

Prepare and Practice

Consider how to answer questions in general and how to respond to specific inquiries.

Prepare some general responses about your organization, its mission, and the importance of your work.

Develop generic responses that can be modified easily.

Practice and prepare, reviewing the speaking points routinely.

Avoid Saying "No Comment"

Responding with "no comment" may lead to speculation and even an assumption of guilt. Once the crisis has been addressed with the Crisis Management Team, and if further investigations are still pending, issue a minimal statement addressing major concerns related to the crisis.

THE THREE A'S OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Accept

Don't be in a state of denial. It doesn't help the situation to act as though it doesn't exist. Own the crisis not because you necessarily caused it (depending on the situation), but because accepting the situation will expedite the process of confronting it.

Acknowledge

Key audiences – both internal and external – will eagerly await to hear from the organization's leadership during a crisis. They want to know what you know. It is always acceptable to be transparent in admitting that you may not have all the details during the initial phase of a crisis. Public acknowledgement can calm fears and decrease anxiety.

Affirm

It's not always easy to simply state a solution or identify a path toward a swift crisis resolution. However, words of affirmation can be a strong tower in garnering confidence and credibility during times of uncertainty. Always be careful not to over-promise in the zest to affirm. Saying what one plans to do and promising a certain outcome are two very different things.

Lesson 6: Be Compassionate

Fear of lawsuits often causes companies to resort to parsed legal language or circumspection. While minimizing liability is important, showing a human side goes a long way to winning goodwill and defusing anger, which often is a motivating factor in lawsuits.

Emotions are contagious. Panic is contagious...But Comfort is also contagious.

Lesson 7: Speak the Truth

Be upfront and transparent, and don't hide behind euphemisms or jargon. The truth will eventually become clear and blurring it will only cause further mistrust and resentment.

Authenticity requires that organizations stand ready to act quickly, decisively and calmly when sharing crisis related information. Providing transparent, timely information helps establish trust with interested parties so they can make decisions in their own best interests.

Lesson 8: Focus and Move Ahead

Whenever possible, align crisis response actions with the long-term vision and overarching goals of the organization. By systematically integrating long-term vision and overarching goals into every aspect of crisis management, organizations can ensure that their immediate actions not only address the crisis effectively but also contribute to the sustained achievement of their strategic objectives.

After a crisis, conduct a thorough evaluation of the response to identify strengths and weaknesses in alignment with long-term goals. Adjust crisis management plans based on lessons learned to better integrate long-term objectives in future responses.

Lesson 9: Communicate Clearly

Present information openly and in a way that others can understand. Recognize that personal perspectives influence how individuals interpret information. Don't try to hide from bad news.

Sometimes it will be appropriate to issue an apology. Understanding how to frame an apology can define the future of your organization. Here are some tips for apologizing:

- Clearly outline what changes will be made to ensure the crisis doesn't happen again. Point the audience toward new policies that will be instituted moving forward.
- Take Responsibility. Don't point fingers or sidestep the issue. Conveying that you understand and care more about the damage done to others, instead of your brand's reputation, is critical.
- Respond Quickly and Thoughtfully. Don't let the news cycle speak for you. Be the first to offer a thoughtful, sincere and non-defensive apology.
- Don't Lie. Be as transparent as possible when addressing the issue. Lying or misleading the public will create distrust and diminish credibility.
- Learn From Others. Look to industry leaders who have successfully navigated a public apology.

By following the guidance presented in this toolkit, and depicted in the following figure, organizations can effectively manage crises and minimize their impact on operations, reputation, and stakeholders.

Use of Social Media in Crisis Communications

Social media has enabled users to spread negative or embarrassing information about a brand or an individual in a nanosecond. Companies need to monitor social media actively and act quickly to address public relations problems. Unflattering episodes can go viral, severely damaging a company's reputation.

Almost all nonprofits use some level of social media. Decide now who will manage that media during an emergency.

There is little chance of controlling information on social media. No matter how hard you try to plug information leaks, they will happen. To counteract erroneous information, provide accurate and useful information. Fight rumors with fact.

Streamline your approach to social media. Respond to questions, comments, or complaints that appear on your social media sites.

Make sure to continually monitor and respond to questions and/or comments posted on the organization's social media sites That way, you can respond to incorrect information and build credibility with your followers.

Social media may be the best way to show the human face of your organization and shore up its reputation for being kind, sympathetic, polite, accurate, and a source of unbiased information. Suggestions for using social media in crisis communications are depicted in the following figure.

WOUNDED WARRIOR

In 2016, CBS News and The New York Times published stories levying accusations that the nonprofit was wasting donor money. “It has spent millions a year on travel, dinners, hotels and conferences that often seemed more lavish than appropriate, more than four dozen current and former employees said in interviews,” the Times wrote. “Former workers recounted buying business-class seats and regularly jetting around the country for minor meetings and staying in $500-per-night hotel rooms.”

Employees specifically questioned the organization’s spending to take hundreds of the organization’s employees to a conference at a Colorado resort. They alleged that the nonprofit spent nearly $3 million, describing a party with excessive food, drink, and fun all fueled by donor funds.

The nonprofit first denied the allegations and demanded a retraction from the media. But the organization soon fired several key leaders, two of whom had been making $473,015 and $369,030, according to tax documents. According to the Washington Post, the Better Business Bureau’s Wise Giving Alliance suspended the charity’s seal designation, and donations plummeted. In September 2016, about 85 employees were laid off.

While donations continued their precipitous decline in 2017, Wounded Warrior set about righting its ship. It brought on new leadership and started to rebuild and grow in 2018 under the helm of new Chief Executive Officer Mike Linnington. A retired general, Linnington pledged that Wounded Warrior Project would no longer hold lavish events and would increase scrutiny on spending for travel and all expenses. In addition, his salary was set at $280,000, far less than his predecessors. After an investigation, the Better Business Bureau again gave the organization its seal of approval, finding that “its spending has been consistent with its programs and mission.”

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