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Developing and Implementing a Crisis Communications Response for Public Entities

The procedure for dealing with a situation or event that presents a threat to people and their homes, businesses or community should be explicit in your crisis management plan.

When a crisis occurs, these points are critical:

- **Have a plan ready beforehand.** Your crisis management plan should be clearly stated and written down.
- **Designate a spokesperson.** Be well prepared and available to meet with the media 24/7. Give updates early and often.
- **Monitor media coverage and social media.** Know what information is already being reported.
- **Be prepared to respond to inaccurate information.** Assume that reporters and key audiences are getting information from other sources.
- **Never mislead your constituents or media.** Always consider all constituents, and be honest and as open as possible.
- **Don't look for a scapegoat.** The priority must always be the successful resolution of a crisis. The "why" of an incident can be addressed later.



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Assess the Situation and Determine the Crisis Level Before Responding

Develop a crisis communications team that will assess the situation, determine facts and begin implementation. Questions to help devise an appropriate crisis communications response and activate the crisis communications plan include:

WHAT HAPPENED?	WHO IS AFFECTED?	WHAT IS THE IMPACT?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the situation?• What facts can be confirmed?• What is the nature of the emergency (people, property, etc.)?• What is the extent of impact/damage (casualties, injuries, property loss, etc.)?• What are people feeling – what emotions need to be considered?• What can be shared externally at this point?• What will happen next?• What immediate steps need to be taken?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who internally is affected?• Who externally is affected?• What is the perception of who is affected?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there any closures?• What delays can be expected?• How long until the entity will resume normal operations?• How could this escalate further?• How will constituents perceive the event?• How will constituents perceive our response to the event?



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Crisis Levels

	EXTREME	MODERATE	MINIMAL
	<p>Includes loss of life or significant injuries; catastrophic natural or terrorism disaster; significant facilities impact or business disruption.</p> <p>Geographic impact – local, national and international</p> <p>Need to disseminate information immediately to numerous key audiences</p>	<p>May include loss of life or injury; natural or terrorism disaster; business disruption; or facilities impact.</p> <p>Geographic impact – local, regional</p> <p>Need to disseminate information rapidly to all key audiences.</p>	<p>May include injury; weather event, isolated public disturbance; city infrastructure damage/repair; or business disruption.</p> <p>Geographic impact – local/isolated; limited access to facilities</p> <p>Need to disseminate information to selected key audiences.</p>
EXAMPLES	<p>Tornado; hurricane; major terrorist attack; loss or kidnap of key executive; external allegations of ethics issues; financial result re-statement</p>	<p>Major weather event closing city; workplace violence; major facilities damage due to fire or accident; supply chain crisis; public disturbance; external allegations of fraud; entity-wide cyber attack</p>	<p>Weather event with road closures; gas leak; fire; key leader health or legal issue; localized cyber attack</p>
STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure safety of communications team and working environment. • Recognize effect on staff participating in the response. • First communication is critical and must be proactive, quick, sensitive and effective. • Local authorities will likely lead communications for first 12/24 hrs. • Expect the need for an on-going communication team; will likely need 24/7 staffing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size and scope of response may not be as significant. • May be able to prioritize key audiences, customize messaging and provide initial update over a longer period of time. • Event likely to be more localized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial communication may need to be quick; follow-up communications and updates may proceed slowly. • Audiences may be more targeted and less comprehensive, as certain key audiences may not need to be informed or may require less frequent updates. • Media relations activities may be reactive only.



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Media Spokesperson Best Practices for Communicating Key Messages

Once the crisis communications team has assessed the situation and determined the crisis level, the media spokesperson should be identified. The spokesperson is the expert – that’s why the reporter is calling the spokesperson for the interview.

10 tips for communicating with reporters:

- 1. Come well prepared.** There should be no surprises.
- 2. Role-play with someone beforehand.** Ask questions that may arise, including those that are negative.
- 3. Ensure accuracy.** Be sure to get the facts right to maintain your credibility with the public.
- 4. Be honest, forthcoming, clear and concise.** You don’t want to risk generating more negative media coverage.
- 5. Stay on message.** Know what you want the audience to hear and remember.
- 6. Reinforce what you are saying.** Look for ways to bridge back to your key message during the interview.
- 7. Think in sound bites.** This is especially important for segments used by radio and television reporters.
- 8. Be straightforward, pleasant and cooperative.** A person who looks and sounds professional will be less likely to make a negative impression on an audience.
- 9. Think before answering.** If an unreasonable question is asked, politely decline to answer (the audience will understand why).
- 10. Manage your time.** You are under no obligation to continue an interview longer than the time that was agreed upon.

How to Develop a Media Kit

The crisis communications team should have a media kit with useful information about your community prepared in advance for the media spokesperson.

5 items to include in a media kit:

1. Fact sheets with statistics and demographics
2. Biographies or historical background
3. Important press articles about your community
4. Statements or summaries of the policy question or crisis being discussed
5. Contact information



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Communication Activation Plan Example

AUDIENCE	ACTIVITY	KEY MESSAGES
	Initiate a crisis event	N/A
N/A	Convene crisis communications team call	N/A
N/A	Identify spokespeople	N/A
Designated Crisis Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email • Phone/text • In-person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational assessment • Crisis level • Ongoing updates
Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email/IT notifications • Phone/text • In person • Newsletters (if applicable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational assessment • Ongoing updates
Elected Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email/phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational assessment • Crisis level • Ongoing updates
Business Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email/phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational assessment • Ongoing updates
General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company website • Outgoing phone message • Social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational assessment • Ongoing updates • Resolution of crisis
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company statement • Press release • Spokespeople • Talking points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational assessment • Ongoing updates • Resolution of crisis

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