

ELECTED OFFICIALS & POLICY MAKERS

Most crises will garner the attention of local, state and federal elected and appointed officials. Keeping these individuals informed about the situation can reduce criticism, minimize confusion and sometimes result in additional resources being brought to bear on the problem. Be sure to provide quick responses to all government inquiries, with assurances of full cooperation. One caution — work to avoid any signs of political favoritism that could cause damage to agency image. Ideally, politics should have no place in responding to a crisis.

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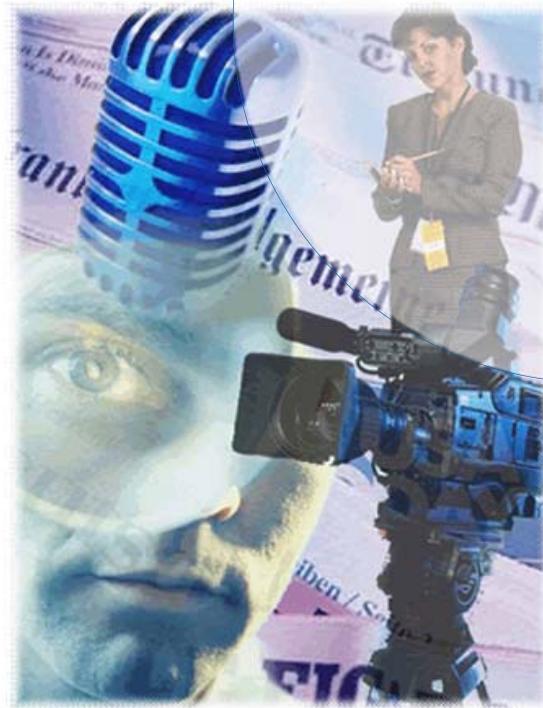
Created by



Decision and Information Sciences Division
Risk Communication Program
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CRISIS COMMUNICATION GUIDE

TAKING CHARGE OF THE CRISIS



When a crisis occurs, be ready to respond to questions from the news media and the public. Failure to address concerns and questions quickly, accurately and completely can lead to the perception that your agency is not qualified to respond and that you do not care about your community.

This guide contains information that will help you identify issues, maintain public confidence and effectively communicate vital information to the community during a crisis.

You never know when a crisis will occur, so keep a copy of this guide in a handy, easy-to-access place. Keep the attached card in your wallet or briefcase for quick reference prior to any interview.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

How your agency handles the first hours of any crisis will often define its reputation for the duration of the entire response and recovery. By providing accurate information in a rapid fashion, agency credibility and confidence can be firmly established. The public will tolerate a crisis. The public will not tolerate inaccurate information, conflicting messages, unnecessary silence or avoidance.

HOW TO SAY IT

- Determine what information and messages you want to communicate, and know what you do not want to say or what you cannot discuss.
- Be clear and concise — do not ramble. Keep your statements short and easy to understand. Phrase things so that a 12-year-old can understand.
- Stick to the facts and key messages.
- Use scientific or technical data, outside experts and independent reports to reinforce your message.
- Express empathy, dedication and capability to deal with the crisis.
- If you do not know, say so. Never lie.
- Never speculate (“what if” questions). Speculation can lead to the perception that the crisis is much more severe than it is.
- Be first with the information — slow release of verified information will lead the media to other, possibly less credible sources.
- Be empathic and reassuring — even a small crisis can be devastating to those involved.
- Stay positive yet realistic — public confidence in the response effort is critical.
- Communicate technical details clearly — avoid jargon and acronyms, and have visuals such as maps or models available for enhanced explanations.
- Never say “no comment” — the public will view this as non-cooperation or possibly guilt. Instead, offer to deliver information as soon as it is available.
- Do not repeat negative words when answering questions from the media.
- Speak only about your agency and what it is doing.
- Off the record? No such thing.

A ready reference to help you
remember what to say and
how to say it during a crisis



U.S. Army



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CRISIS COMMUNICATION IS CRITICAL TO YOUR INCIDENT RESPONSE

WHY WE DO IT

Effective crisis communication with the public through the media grants many long- and short-term benefits, including:

- Getting important emergency information to people when they need it;
- Creating and/or enhancing response organization authority and credibility;
- Calming public fear and anger;
- Enhancing control over media “spin;” and
- Providing damage control for agency image.

Ineffective crisis communication can result in many negative consequences, including fatalities, injuries, property loss, litigation and lasting damage to agency reputation.

MAKE A PLAN

No crisis communication effort will be successful without a clear and comprehensive plan. Make sure the plan addresses how information is gathered and verified, utilization of the Joint Information System, how and when to activate a Joint Information Center, message crafting, meeting the needs of special populations, and working with the media.

WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE

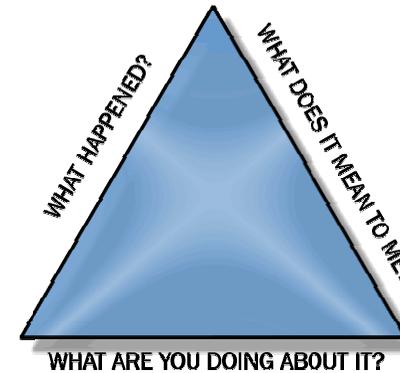
When dealing with the media during a crisis, it is often easy to forget that the people you are actually trying to reach are the members of the public. When developing statements about a crisis remember that you have multiple audiences:

- Community and/or nation
- Special populations, including non-English speakers, people with special needs, etc.
- Workers responding to the incident and their families
- Members of your organization, other stakeholders
- Media

KEY MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

Any statement should consist of no more than three or four key messages you want to convey to the public. In the initial stages of a crisis, information about health and safety should constitute the primary message. Other key messages should have information to calm the public, such as what actions have been taken to respond to and recover from the crisis, dedication to solving the problem, levels of expertise involved, and statements of concern. Try to phrase your key messages in sound bites of 10-12 words for ease of understanding.

THE MESSAGE TRIANGLE



Immediately following a crisis, the public will want to know three things:

- **What happened?** These facts should be released as soon as the information is confirmed. Updates should be frequent.
- **What does it mean to me?** Place yourself in the public’s shoes. Provide people with information to enhance their safety and address potential concerns they may have. Fear of the unknown is often greater than fear of the facts.
- **What are you doing about it?** The public wants to get “back to normal” as soon as possible. Tell people what you are doing to control the situation and restore order. Explain how the process will work, how long it could take and what can be expected.

WHEN YOU CANNOT SAY ANYTHING

There are circumstances when information must be withheld from the public. Classified information, details of law enforcement investigations, private medical reports and some personal data should not be publicly discussed. If these issues arise, explain why the information is being withheld and then bridge back to key messages. Avoid talking about cause, blame and costs. These issues can be addressed following the crisis.

MEDIA CRISIS COVERAGE CYCLE

Most crises tend to follow a predictable cycle. Media coverage will mirror this cycle in the form of news content and issues covered. Know these phases and anticipate the questions and stories the media will pursue:

Breaking Phase — Media arrives on scene requiring access and information; basic coverage of who, what, when, where, why and how.

Sustaining Phase — Media attention grows, frequent use of subject matter experts to fill immediate information void.

Recovery Phase — Crisis is defined, questions on cause, problems and blame surface. A reduction in media interest may occur.

Anniversary Phase — Spike in interest, questions on current status and lessons learned.