CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Bad things happen to good organizations and when they do, the reporters that have been ignoring all of your press releases for years, suddenly have a new interest in making sure everyone knows about you. In times of crisis, it is important to have an established crisis communication plan so that you're not "winging it."

A crisis is any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of your organization, usually brought on by adverse or negative media attention. These situations can be any kind of legal or ethical matter or the result of natural or man-made disasters. (In addition to providing services during disasters and updating the media on progress, nonprofits often face scrutiny over how well they responded.)

If handled correctly the damage can be minimized. A good rule of thumb is to tell the truth, tell it all and tell it quickly. The caveat to that rule is you must have a plan and a team that can decide how to deliver the truth. Going it alone often results in problems.

THE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

The role of the Crisis Communication Team is to quickly come up with a plan of action and support the spokesperson in crafting the message. Who and how many you have on your team will vary by organization size and complexity. The chief executive and the board chair should lead the team. You might include your governance committee, your communications director or other staff or volunteers as appropriate. If you have someone with legal expertise, it is a good idea to include them.

Once the crisis communication team is selected a contact list should be made of the people on the team and what each team member is responsible for. The list should include name, primary cell phone numbers, and alternate contact numbers. All key staff and board members should have access to this list. It should be updated at least yearly as board terms expire and new officers are elected.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

The crisis communication team should write a script to supply to staff who will be answering the phones. You want to ensure that the message is basically, "We are aware. We are working on it. We will get back to you."

> **Sample response:** At this time, the leadership team is gathering facts. A spokesperson (use the person's name and title if it has already been decided) will be issuing a statement as soon as possible. Can I take your contact information so that we can notify you when the statement will be ready?

Keep a contact logs for all inquiries about the situation. It should include the name and contact information of the person as well as any specific questions that they may have had.

Try to be as specific as possible without making promises that you may not be able to keep. If you think you'll be ready with a statement by 2:00 PM, tell them 5:00 PM. Give yourself some breathing room.

You may want to circulate to the press a simple prepared statement with very basic facts. "This happened here at this time involving these people. The incident is under investigation and more information will be forthcoming."

IDENTIFY THE ORGANIZATION'S POSITION

Once the immediate response is in place, the team can get down to the work of deciding exactly how to respond. There are many factors to consider often including legal implications.

From a public relations standpoint, it is usually best to acknowledge any mistakes that have been made. This gives you the opportunity to rebuild credibility and trust. However, you have to weigh the pros and cons of a public relations recovery versus any legal consequences that might occur if you publicly admit to wrongdoings.

The Crisis Communications Team should seek legal advice to understand the full implications of any position that they take. Lawyers often approach things from a "don't admit to anything" point of view, so it is important to get all the information from them and then let the team (not the lawyer) decide how to proceed.

The public will want to know what went wrong, why it went wrong and what your plans are to fix it and to prevent it from happening again. Give only the facts that can be confirmed by reliable sources. Don't speculate.

When you are addressing the "why" it is important to remember that people want to hear a reason not an excuse. "The State cut our funding so we couldn't…" comes across as an excuse because it seems to blame an external force – even if it is truly the root cause of the problem. It is better to identify what you could have done differently under the circumstances (reduced funding) than to point fingers. Common attributions for why things went wrong:

- Human error
- Clerical error
- Unauthorized procedures
- Inadequate supervision
- Inadequate quality control
- Misuse of confidential information
- Errors of judgement
- Inadequate standard operating procedures

Things to remember:

- The integrity and reputation of the organization are at stake.
- Lies and excuses are likely to do more harm than good.
- Ignoring the situation won't make it go away.

THE SPOKESPERSON

When creating the Crisis Communication Team, a spokesperson and a backup spokesperson should be identified. These individuals should be:

- Familiar with the operations of the organization
- Knowledgeable about the current crisis
- Comfortable speaking publicly
- Skilled in handling unexpected questions

The Crisis Communications Team works with the spokesperson to craft the response. During this process the language should be reviewed carefully.

- Avoid jargon and abbreviations.

- Remove potentially inflammatory language
- Ensure that sentences are clear and easy to understand.
- Check for tone – have the spokesperson read it to see how it sounds.
- Don't try to impress with vocabulary; keep it simple.
- After the team is happy with it, have others read it and give feedback.

The Crisis Communication Team should also try to develop a list of likely questions that could be asked and prepare answers to as many as possible. Review the contact log that was initiated during the immediate response phase for specific questions being asked. Consider questions not only that the public might have, but also that your staff might have.

If the spokesperson will be addressing the press or any other audience, print the prepared remarks in large print with wide margins to make it easier for the spokesperson to follow along as he/she speaks. Don't staple the pages so that they are easy to shuffle through. Have members of the Crisis Communication Team on hand to take notes about any questions that require follow-up.