

Are you ready for a crisis?

- Identify a crisis team**
- Make an incidence response questionnaire**
- Identify the spokesperson**
- Get your messaging ready**
- Communicate with your employees**
- Communicate with stakeholders**
- Communicate with the media**
- Avoid crisis communication barriers**

Planning for a Crisis

No one expects a crisis. So, it's nearly impossible to plan for every scenario that could arise. However, there are several things you can do in advance that will prepare you to handle almost any crisis situation.

1. Identify crisis team

An effective crisis team should be as small as possible. It should be able to make immediate decisions in regard to the crisis at hand. Team members should have knowledge of the stakeholder/media landscape at play.

We strongly encourage you to include NAA's Todd Usher (tusher@naahq.org) on your crisis team. NAA is here to provide insight and counsel to get you through any potential problems.

2. Incident response questionnaire

This document will help the crisis response team collectively determine what makes the situation a crisis, what the desired outcome is and potential solutions. Take the time to fill out this information from the earliest stages of crisis response. It will help establish a more consistent and effective response.

3. Identify spokesperson

To communicate a consistent message throughout the duration of the response, it is recommended that the organization put forth only one spokesperson.

Take the time and effort to train them. Every six months, hold a refresher in crisis communications and practice your response in the face of hostile stakeholders.

4. Identify stakeholders

Evaluate who is or will be impacted by the current situation. Anticipate the extent of that impact. Relating to each stakeholder group will help assure the public that your organization is doing all it can to right the situation.

5. Messaging

Create a media statement. This will equip you with a response if the media contacts you. It will also help the crisis response team create baseline messaging for your response.

After you've created a media statement, create key messages, an internal Q&A document and any other necessary communication materials. If you've determined to proactively issue a media statement, via a wire or simply posted to the website, now is that time to do so.

6. **Communicate with employees**

Employees can be your greatest asset or your strongest opponents during a crisis. Communicate with employees early and equip them with the materials they need to deliver the same consistent messaging.

Although employees are generally not authorized to speak on behalf of your organization, each and every employee is an unofficial spokesperson. Make them cheerleaders.

7. **Communicate with stakeholders**

It should be a top priority to communicate directly with each stakeholder group. The more personalized the communication the better. But when dealing with large or multiple groups, personal communication is not always possible.

Communicate via personal phone calls or through formal letters or emails. For situations that impact a large group, post important information like a media statement and steps being taken to resolve an issue to your website.

8. **Communicate with media**

How to communicate with the media is best determined on a case-by-case basis. There are times when a single press statement is all that is needed or advised. For some situations, taking your story directly to the media is the best plan of action.

NAA is here to help you make this determination.

Barriers to Crisis Communications Success

In a crisis situation, employees, key stakeholders and the public will be watching your organization closely. The following are barriers to successful crisis response:

1. **Lack of empathy**

A crisis isn't the time to be self-righteous or blame others for the problem. Not showing compassion or empathy for stakeholders or the situation in general will doom your communications, regardless of if you are in the right.

2. **Communication delay**

With the advent of instant communication via social media, waiting even a few hours to respond to a crisis is too long. You don't need to offer a complete answer to the situation at hand. But you do need to at least acknowledge the situation.

3. **Failure to anticipate the degree of angry response**

Anyone affected by a crisis will be angry. With social media providing an instant and unfiltered outlet, you will see much more of it now than ever before.

Don't take it personally or respond in kind. Stick to your messaging and treat each complaint with empathy and respect, no matter how angry it might be.

4. Lack of coordination among groups within your organization or between your organization and outside entities

A crisis response must be coordinated and delivered with a singular voice. Everyone must be on the same page and remain there for the duration of the crisis. All parties involved should know ahead of time of important dates and times, like when a press release will be distributed or press conference held.

5. Lack of clarity about the respective roles of key decision-makers

There is no time in a crisis for forgetting one task or duplicating a second. Have clear delegation of responsibilities.

6. Failure to communicate quickly and directly with those most affected, especially employees

People want to know what's happening. If they don't know the facts, they are likely to speculate. Those rumors often make their way to the public. Give employees as much information as needed to quell any speculation and do so as soon as possible.

7. Inconsistent messaging

Competing or contradictory statements are the quickest way to lose credibility and political capital during a crisis. They undermine trust. This is why it's so important to clearly define messaging at the beginning of a crisis.

8. Overestimated readiness

Are you prepared or do you just think you are? The middle of a crisis is no time to find out that your spokesperson can't speak or that you don't know who your key stakeholders are. Prepare and practice crisis communications.

9. Insufficient commitment and leadership required to respond quickly, compassionately and conclusively

A crisis team must have the authority and the ability to make and implement decisions. They must be savvy enough to do so in the best interest of your organization without alienating other stakeholders.

Essentials for Crisis Communications Success

How an organization communicates, the tone, timing and message, is directly tied to how victims, stakeholders and the public will perceive you. Effective communication can help to preserve your organization's reputation after the crisis. The following are essentials to effective communication during a crisis:

1. **Candor**

Effective crisis communications is straight and to the point. Don't try to hide facts or paint a picture different from reality. Stick to the facts and to your messaging.

2. **Openness, accessibility and transparency Running and hiding from the problem will not make it go away.** It will only make you look worse. Spokespeople must be available and key stakeholders/media members should have access to them in some capacity. Show, don't tell, what you are doing to fix the problem.

3. **Truthfulness**

Don't lie. It is the media's job to find out the truth, and they are good at their jobs.

4. **Apology**

If you have something to apologize for, say you're sorry and mean it. A phony apology only adds another crisis to the situation.

5. **Responsiveness**

Answers don't need to be immediate. But they need to be timely. A simple response of, "We are aware of the situation and are currently investigating," can pacify stakeholders while you work to resolve the issue.

6. **Engagement**

Get ahead of the story by engaging key stakeholders on your terms. Don't wait for them to come to you. This will help you control the terms of the interaction and show that you care about their concerns.

7. **Clarification and correction**

Mistakes happen in the course of a crisis. Keep them to a minimum with proper planning and messaging. If someone does misspeak or an incorrect fact is used, make a point to correct it publicly. Own the mistake and move on from there.

Apology Strategies to Avoid During Crisis Response

With all eyes on your organization during a crisis situation, key stakeholders and the public will be looking to your organization for signs of regret, or for an apology. Although a direct apology is not always necessary, there are certain apology strategies, or deflections, that are important to avoid in these situations. In the end, they can do more damage in an already uncertain situation.

1. **Self-Forgiveness**

Using the excuse that it's an industry problem or that it could happen to anyone. Right now, it doesn't matter if that's true or not. The public wants someone to take responsibility and shared responsibility with others in the industry won't satisfy that need.

Examples:

- It's an industry problem.
- We're not the only ones.
- Let's not blow this out of proportion.

2. **Self-Talk**

Apologizing on the basis that it's a rare incident that won't happen again can lead to loss of trust from the public. Can you guarantee that it won't happen again? Probably not. Do your best to make right the current situation, and you will gain sympathy in the public eye.

Examples:

- It's an isolated incident.
- If we don't do it, someone else will.

3. **Self-Delusion**

Pointing the finger, or outright denying that your organization is at fault. Even if your organization is not directly at fault, the public trusts, and in turn sees more favorably, an organization that can accept its role in the situation and do everything in its power to reverse the situation.

Examples:

- It's not our problem.
- It's not our fault.

4. **Lying**

Lying to employees, stakeholders or the public is perhaps one of the most critical mistakes an organization can make in a crisis situation. Regaining trust and empathy are primary goals of a crisis response, and when an organization is untruthful, not only is its reputation impacted negatively during the current situation, but future perceptions will also be forever altered.

Examples:

- It can't happen again.
- It hasn't happened before.