Ten Steps to Effective Crisis Management for NonProfit Organizations

Why Have a Crisis Communication Plan?

Don't think you're different - crisis can strike any organization, at any time. The long-term health and reputation of your organization is at stake.

What matters most in a crisis communications situation is not what you do in the middle of the crisis, but what you do in the weeks, months and years ahead of one.

One of the worst things that organizations can say in a crisis is "no comment."

1. Identify Your Crisis Communications Team

- Four to six trusted staffers and/or board members.
- A public relations professional and attorney serving as advisers, if deemed necessary and budget allows
- Stakeholders with critical knowledge of the identified vulnerabilities/crises
- A team leader needs to be identified.
- New team members can be added as deemed necessary.

2. Anticipate Possible Problems and Crisis

The first and most important part of crisis management work will be to convene the Crisis Communications Team to assess potential organizational vulnerabilities/crises.

There are countless benefits to this exercise, including:

- Discovery of issues or situations that you can fix before they become a public problem. There are times when you know that a crisis is imminent due to a planned action including termination or layoff of employees or officers; closing of a program or location; a change in operations etc.
- Preparation of possible responses.
- Notification of critical stakeholders about the issue and be pro-active instead of reactive

3. Identify Spokespeople

Every organization should have more than one spokesperson, identified by having the right skills, adequate training and the appropriate position in the organization.

- The Right Skills
  - Must be comfortable speaking in front of audiences and cameras.
  - Must be calm, diplomatic and not get drawn into conflict.
  - Must be quick thinking, but also able to stick to agreed-upon talking points.
  - Must be skilled with social media and have the discipline to proof-read responses before posting.

- The Appropriate Position
  - It is usually not wise to have the CEO/President serve as the spokesperson in crisis situations as he/she will likely be presented with far more and deeper questions than a spokesperson. A spokesperson is just "doing his/her job" while the president or CEO is expected to have ALL of the answers
  - The appropriate spokesperson can often be identified just after a crisis emerges based on the right qualities and subject-matter expertise.

- Training
  - All potential spokespeople must be identified and trained by the team or an outside public relations consultant long before a crisis arises.

    - Key Points
      - Listen to all questions being asked. Never speak until the person asking the questions stops.
      - Be polite - at all times; look at the person asking the questions and avoid looking down at your notes or phone.
      - Answer all questions being asked, but answer only with your agreed-upon messaging points. Don't get drawn into long conversations.
      - Always return phone calls from reporters or others seeking information, asking for their list of questions and a response deadline. Respond before the deadline with your messaging points.

    - Role Play - Videotape, review and critique a rehearsal session with your Crisis Communication Team.

4. Identify Audiences

Identifying stakeholders, both internal and external, will be key to determining your messaging and the most effective communications channels to use. Likely stakeholders include:

- Employees
- Board members
- Donors
- Clients or Customers

5. Establish Notification Systems

Before a crisis happens, it is important to establish notification systems that will allow rapid outreach to stakeholders using multiple channels, including email, text, phone call, social media etc.

- Determine the communication channels to be used.
- Assign roles/responsibilities to team members.
- Develop/maintain an accessible list of stakeholder contact information.

6. Create Foundational Statements

While full message development must await the outbreak of an actual crisis the development of foundational statements that can give you a head-start to addressing the possible situations identified by the assessment you conducted in Step 2 of this plan.

Some language ideas:

“We value our clients and the trust the community has placed in us and we work every day to be worthy of that trust. We are working diligently to …. We are an organization with long and deep roots in this community.

“We will be supplying additional information when it is available and posting it on our website.”

The Crisis Communications Team should regularly review these statements to determine if they require revision and/or whether statements for other scenarios should be developed.

7. Assess the Crisis

Assessing the situation is the first crisis communications step you can't take in advance. If you haven't prepared in advance, your reaction will be delayed as it will be necessary to run through steps 1 to 7, usually resulting in a hasty, inefficient strategy.

The Communications Crisis Team should gather and provide relevant information so that the appropriate response can be developed. Reacting without adequate information is a classic "shoot first and ask questions afterward" situation in which you could be the primary victim.

8. Create Crisis-Specific Messaging

Using the foundational statements as a starting point, the Crisis Communications Team must continue developing the crisis-specific message by:

- Identifying the target audience(s) using your stakeholders (subgroups) list.
- Determining the questions stakeholders will ask and the information needed to answer those.
- Keeping the messaging simple with no more than three main points.
- Adapting the message to the various communication channels that will be used.

9. Monitor Systems

Ongoing intelligence gathering is essential for both crisis prevention and crisis response. Know what people are saying about the organization/situation via various social media channels, in legacy media, and "word on the street."

- Prevention - Having this information can identify negative "trends" that, not responded to, could become a problem.
- During a crisis - Monitor feedback from all stakeholders allowing for you to accurately adapt strategy and tactics.
- Use social media tracking apps, Google Alerts and train staff to report what they are hearing/seeing.

10. Analyze After the Crisis

It is critical to engage the Crisis Communications Team in an analysis of what went right and what didn't work after the crisis ends. It will enable you to do better next time.