



**CRISIS COMMUNICATION :
PLANNING AND PROCEDURES**



USAID-Funded Economic Governance II Project
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I. Introduction

There are two key elements of any crisis plan:

- 1. The crisis plan itself (how your organization will deal with the issue at hand, to minimize loss and lost working time)**
- 2. The crisis communications plan (how you will communicate with the press and the public about the crisis that is occurring)**

Many organizations prepare one without the other. Both are vitally important.

Most organizational crises never get reported in the press. Sometimes that happens because the story was not newsworthy, but it often happens because the organization handled the situation skillfully enough that it never became visible to the press. Sometimes, a crisis may be significant enough that it is both newsworthy and gets attention in the press. However that attention either lasts for a short period of time, or it is handled so well that the reputation of the organization improves as people see how well the crisis was handled.

A key element in making sure that this happens is the development of a crisis communication plan in your organization.

Even if you don't decide to create a crisis plan (unfortunately most organizations don't have one), it is vitally important that you put together a plan to effectively communicate with the press and the public when a crisis occurs.

An effective crisis communications plan may be the most important part of your crisis planning process.

This manual is designed to help you create a plan that works.

II. Getting Started

Because each organization has its own unique culture, the first step in creating a crisis plan should be **to take an objective look at your organization**. Consider all of the potential crises. Think about what could possibly go wrong according to what you do and who you serve.

You will need to make a detailed project plan for developing your crisis communications plan. This is necessary because any effective crisis communications plan has several components. These components will depend on the size and nature of your organization.

Do your research. Learn as much as you can about your organization. Then create a project plan to collect the information that you are lacking. Think about who has the institutional knowledge. Identify them. Write a list of pertinent interview questions for those people. Meet with them and learn all you can. Start to build your key crisis messages for yourself, your minister or for spokespeople in each functional area. Set deadlines for yourself to keep the project on schedule.

II. 1. The Research Phase

Before talking to anyone in the organization, look at the organization's history. Are there well-kept records? Was there a crisis in the past and if so, how was it managed? Did your predecessor create a crisis communications plan that is now outdated? If so, is there any part of that plan that you could still use?

II. 2. Preparing For the Interview Process

In the interest of maintaining professionalism and efficiency, it is recommended that you start by creating a series of interview questions. Come up with all of the scenarios you can on your own and then refer them to your manager for validation. Talk to others in the ministry who play key roles and get their advice. It will be critical to make sure everyone knows what will be expected of them if a crisis does happen.

If you manage communications or are responsible for setting up a crisis management plan for the ministry, you would need to set up meetings with all of the director generals and other stakeholders to discover what could possibly go wrong in each of their areas. In order to respect the time of the people you will interview, before starting on this process you need to prepare beforehand.

II.3. Who to Interview

When you are setting up your internal interviews, you may not be sure who you'll need to talk to. Obtain a current organization chart. You will want to meet with those individuals at the senior management level and probably at mid manager level.

It might be difficult to obtain time with these people. It is important to schedule these meetings in a sensitive manner. Sometimes this means that you will have to be flexible and make changes to the schedule. Work with their assistants and be determined without being irritating. Make sure they know that you are creating a plan that will help everyone to manage things in times of crises. Be positive.

Don't forget to meet with every relevant manager. If you are unsure of the list of people to meet, perhaps you can validate it with the minister's assistant or others who have been with the ministry for several years. The people in these roles can be your best facilitators and sources of information.

It is also important to be aware of the limited amount of time most managers have. Sit down and write out a series of interview questions for each manager according to his or her area of expertise. Have some understanding of what these people do, to avoid losing their respect. You want to meet them, with some knowledge. If you aren't sure what it is that they do, conduct some research on the Internet. This may be useful. You could also talk to colleagues that you trust who work in their departments to get a better idea of who you are dealing with. Be sensitive.

While you are writing your interview questions you will want to be conscious of ministry politics and allied sensitivities. Use common sense.

II. 4. Potential Crises to Include In Your Interview Plan

Whatever the size of your organization, many managers may be uncomfortable talking about the possibility of a disaster in their departments. Think of the potential reactions to some of your questions. Which ones would make you feel uncomfortable or angry if you were running the department? Identify those and adapt the language,

but don't avoid the issues. You want this to be a viable plan. You need to cover all of the scenarios. You will need to think of every reasonable disaster.

Here is a list of crises that could happen and that could be a viable part of a crisis plan in your ministry:

- Government investigation
- Controversial legal action
- Accusation of discrimination based on religion, race, ethnicity, or gender
- Serious injury to someone within or outside of the organization
- Protest or civil disturbance
- Labor dispute
- Physical violence between co-workers
- Release of confidential information
- Theft by an outsider (of information or physical assets)
- Fraud
- Death of a top official
- Officials are arrested for inappropriate or criminal behavior
- Natural disaster
- Plane crash
- Major interruptions in service
- Computer system crash, causing you to lose all data
- Fire
- Explosion
- Significant job losses in a specific geographic region
- A major institutional partner or supplier has a crisis, focusing attention on your organization
- Leading ministry official / spokesperson involved in a personal scandal
- Closing of offices
- Abduction / loss of your entire management team

II.5. Convincing People of the Importance of a Crisis Communications Plan

Many people don't think crisis planning is necessary. It's your job to show that this planning is **crucial**. Create messages that will help you to deal with objections. You can explain how a crisis plan will benefit everyone from the minister and down to the lower levels of staff. In the process of convincing people, you will want to note the risks, but try to avoid focusing on the negative aspects when discussing matters. Talk about how this crisis plan will increase efficiency, reduce lost working time, create an opportunity for some good publicity and mitigate the need for unplanned spending because proper planning has been prepared.

A manager may say: "We can't afford the time and resources necessary to support your project to create a crisis communications plan." You could reply saying: "In the event of a crisis of any kind, we will save a lot of time and money by avoiding 'crisis spending,' one of the most costly aspects of any crisis".

If possible, speak with colleagues at other ministries or organizations who have recently gone through crises. Talk to communications professionals who had a plan. Talk to those who did not have a plan. Ask them if they are willing to share information with you regarding costs for creating, or not creating a plan. Make calculations to discover the real costs of crisis planning.

Most managers are concerned about their budgets. Create and present an estimated Crisis Management budget along with a case study for developing the plan. Discuss with your manager.

Don't let costs become a major factor in the argument. In most cases, a crisis communications plan requires no actual cash outlays, just the time of those involved in its creation.

It is important to set proper expectations about the plan. Don't give people the impression that a crisis communications plan is fully comprehensive. This is critical because if a crisis does happen you won't want to be held solely responsible for the outcome of the communications work.

It is a team effort. The plan cannot be perfect as all crises are different.

II. 6. Who Will Talk With The Press?

One of the most important elements of the plan is agreeing who in the ministry can effectively talk with the press. Identifying these people may be based on internal politics. Sometimes a leader of the organization is certain that he or she be the only person to speak on behalf of the organization. However, what if that person is unavailable, is involved in resolving the situation, or is the cause of the crisis?

Each organization should have a primary contact and several secondary contacts in place, trained, and prepared in advance to be able to effectively communicate with the press.

When you are conducting your internal interviews, ask if that particular person would be comfortable in speaking to the media (if it is appropriate for that person to do this, and if that person is willing to undergo training). Be sensitive how you raise this topic. Discuss the various issues raised by the person being interviewed. Talk openly about each one and ask whether he or she would be comfortable discussing those issues with the media. If the answer is no, ask who would be willing to discuss those issues, and record those names.

Assessing the people selected to deal with the press is also necessary. Test them to see if they can actually deal with the press. For example put them in front of cameras and lights and have people ask them some very direct, even hostile questions. This will often reveal who is truly comfortable in the role of press spokesperson, and who is not.

You may find that people may never have had any formal media training. Offer to deliver media training to those who need it or want it. Obtain agreement from your manager that the person meets the Person Specification for such a role. Be sensitive to the fact that you may be dealing with people who have strong egos. A lot of people who are highly trained in one area feel confident in all areas. This is often not the case when it comes to a high pressure situation when many news cameras are present, difficult questions are asked, and the organization is facing a serious issue. In situations like these, sometimes even the most experienced spokespeople feel very challenged.

Even if an official has not been a spokesperson under these circumstances before, he or she may have the necessary skills. For example, most people who have reached a certain level of accomplishment as a professional – whether in a large corporation, a

government agency, or a non-profit organization will have some presentation experience. If a manager is reluctant to be a spokesperson, compare talking to the media with giving an important presentation. The skills necessary for success in both arenas are similar. Personal presentation, communication skills, careful thinking before speaking and preparation, are all important.

There are useful guidelines for giving successful media interviews that can be used:

Be Prepared

Don't think you can just improvise through a challenging interview, especially one on television. Prepare. Rehearse and practice answers.

Plan, Never Panic

Never answer when unprepared and don't be intimidated into giving answers quickly.

Have a message

Write down up to three points that you want to communicate, and repeat them several times when answering questions. Don't worry if you repeat your message. The more you say it, the more likely it is that it will be printed or broadcast.

Anticipate questions

Think of the ten most likely questions that you will be asked and prepare answers for them.

Use a Bridging Technique

Briefly answer the question, but then take the opportunity to use a transitional phrase such as "In fact, let me add that..." or "The point I want to make is...". This gives you the opportunity to get a major point across even though the interviewer or reporter didn't ask a question about it.

Be Honest

Don't guess at answers, don't make up answers, and don't lie. The interviewer or reporter may already know the answer to the question. Never be afraid to say "I don't know, but I will try to find out the answer and contact you later".

Be Brief

Don't take five minutes to give a 20-second answer. Think headlines and "sound bites". Answers should be given in less than 30 seconds.

Avoid Jargon

A press interview is not the time to demonstrate the range of your vocabulary or use of a lot of jargon. Speak plainly. Use short words and sentences.

Be Positive

Make your own points rather than defend against negative comments made to you. Avoid becoming defensive, arrogant, evasive, or uncooperative.

Be Prompt and Return Calls

Reporters work to a deadline. Today's news won't wait for tomorrow's comments.

Don't Fill Space

Don't feel like it's your obligation to keep the interview going. Filling space often means you're moving away from your message and that's when you can make mistakes.

Don't Speculate

Deal in facts, not fantasy.

Don't Be Intimidated

You are the expert in your subject, not the reporter. State your points with authority.

Don't Go Off the Record

Stay on the record. Everything you say could be attributed to you. There is no such thing as "off the record".

Avoid "No Comment"

If you really can't talk about a subject, explain why you can't, and say what you can say.

Follow-up

After the interview, promptly provide any materials that the reporter has requested and that you have agreed to provide. Do not provide any confidential, inappropriate or sensitive information.

III. Putting It All Together

Once you have collected the necessary information, organize everything that you have learned. Consider each scenario that was raised and everyone who could be affected by it. Create a mini-plan for each imagined crisis. Each mini-plan should include the following:

1. Names and contact information of key spokespeople and secondary spokespeople
2. Messages for the spokespeople to keep them focused during interviews
3. An internal communications plan
4. Contact information for local agencies that may need to be reached according to the type of emergency
5. Relevant images in electronic format if applicable – this can mean headshots of officials, pictures of the main headquarters, etc.
6. A list of emergency press supply kits and where they are stored
7. "Standard procedures" or policy information used by that functional area
8. Press release template documents

Once you have reviewed and edited the information that you have collected from each person interviewed and created the mini-plan for that area, send it back for final validation to make sure that you have covered all of the relevant ideas.

IV. A Closer Look At the Mini-Plan

#1 – Contact Information

Having contact information for your spokespeople seems like common sense, but, in a crisis, you may not be able to reach people using the normal channels. Have all of their contact details – including a home phone number, mobile phone and personal email address, and also consider having an alternative contact person. Know the title, proper spelling and have a phonetic pronunciation for the names of each of your spokespeople. This is something that you will need to confirm for reporters when they are checking facts.

#2 - Messaging

Your communications plan should include a set of key messages (each printed out on a separate page) for each crisis scenario that has been identified. Creating messages depends on the nature and size of the organization.

Your other messages will be designed for the top officials or other designated senior managers and will focus upon what measures have been and will be taken under certain circumstances. You may also have a person available to talk about the extensive safety measures you have taken as an organization.

Encourage your spokespeople to use this message when talking to the media: “We are still working hard to gather all of the facts and will give you information as soon as we can. In a situation like this, we want to work with you by being forthcoming while still presenting factual information”.

This comment shows that you will not comment without knowing the facts, while not having the negative connotations of a “no comment” statement.

If safety is involved, it is important to tell the media that, as a ministry, your first priority is to protect the local community and your employees. If there is a natural disaster, talk about how grateful you are for the support of local rescue workers and firefighters, for example. Thank police personnel for their responsiveness and bravery if they are present.

You should have a separate page which will contain the general information that reporters are likely to ask for in a time of crisis. It is useful to have this in a format that can be copied and distributed to reporters to ensure that they get their facts correct. Items that may be in such a factsheet include:

- a. How many people are employed
- b. Whether there are multiple facilities and locations
- c. What happens at each location
- d. Where locations are
- e. How many years the organization has been in existence
- f. What services you provide

Another sheet of paper for your spokesperson will contain updated information throughout the crisis and will include the facts as you are aware of them at the time.

Items on that sheet may include:

- a. Number of people affected
- b. Estimated impact on the organization
- c. Estimated time that the organization cannot operate

Many messages will rely on information that is going to be received gradually as the situation develops. Stay aware of everything that is happening so you can help to develop responses and give facts to the media quickly.

Remember the “12 Rules in Talking to the Mass Media”:

1. Know your message
2. Know your audience
3. Listen to the question
4. Answer the question
5. Be positive
6. Be honest and careful how comments are worded
7. Never say “No Comment”
8. Don’t say more than you know
9. Don’t say what you don’t want to be quoted
10. Take control
11. Be yourself
12. Remember the 12 Rules

#3 – Internal Communications

It’s important to have the spokespeople prepared and your messages ready before starting on the internal communications process. In a crisis situation, communicating internally should be your number one priority. This is true for several reasons. It lets employees know that management cares about their safety and well-being, boosting morale during a time when it could fall. Acting quickly also helps to minimize the affect of the crisis.

For example, if you are dealing with a situation where someone gave wrong information to the media about an official stealing funds and it is untrue, you, the management team, and the respective official will need to act quickly to stop the potential damage.

During crises, internal communications are often overlooked. When that happens, employees often feel confused and disappointed. If your leader does not want to communicate internally, you can persuade him or her on the need to communicate by illustrating how it is a chance to improve the reputation of the organization. The first thing that is done in the event of a crisis, even before talking to the press, is to hold a meeting with employees. Talk with reporters later.

Employees should not hear about a problem from the press. They should hear it from you first. This meeting is used to communicate clearly to staff and gives your spokespeople an opportunity to practice before facing similar questions and issues from the press. Don’t simply write a memo or send an email about the emergency.

Your people need to see your faces, to hear your sincerity, and to feel comfort that management is working to keep everything under control.

#4 – Key Community Contacts

Have key contact information ready, for local, national, non-governmental organizations, or governmental agencies, that may be impacted by your emergency.

#5 – Images

Collect images in electronic and paper format that illustrate key areas of your activity and key people. The print press will usually want a current photograph of the spokesperson's face. A straightforward format is best, with the subject looking directly at the camera to avoid creating the impression that your spokesperson is evasive. Use an expression somewhere between a smile and a serious face.

Make sure there is consistency with the photographs. All officials should be well presented and informal, wearing professional clothing. Using the same photographer to photograph all the spokespersons ensures that all of the photographs have the same look and feel.

Other images that the print press might want would include photographs of your building or your main headquarters, or a photograph of the inside of a facility in a governorate. Make sure that these images are in jpeg or TIFF format at a resolution of 300 dpi or higher. This is important because otherwise the print press can't use them.

These images should be provided to the press on a CD as soon as possible after your initial contact with them. The disk should also contain a copy of your logo, and a copy of your press kit in digital format.

Preparing all of this content is in your own interests. It helps to show the media that you are helping them. It is also one of the ways to control your message. The more images you have prepared and can provide, the less the media will need to gather from the crisis scene. You may even consider taking several digital photographs of the crisis while it is happening that you can use at your discretion as you supply news to the world. You will also want to have photographs for posterity, insurance or legal reasons.

#6 – Emergency Supplies

Every organization should have an emergency media supply kit. Supplies could be site-specific. Make a list of emergency supplies necessary for you and where they are located. Know where there are reserve supplies. Create a map of these locations. Have a torch in your desk drawer to locate those supplies if the emergency happens and the lights go out.

#7 – Policies and Procedures

When there is a crisis, the media wants to know whether standard procedures were in place and followed. If you have special policies and practices and answer "yes," the next question could be: "what are those procedures and how do you enforce them?". If

the standard procedure was not followed, quickly find this out. If the reason a procedure was not followed has to do with someone being new, a language barrier or simple human error, then you must consider the legal implications of your answer. This is an area where the danger of exposing your organization is high, so use great caution.

You should establish policies regarding media handling. For instance, it is necessary to issue a memo for all the MOLSA staff to clarify who specifically handles relations with the media.

A sample document follows:

Media Guidelines for MOLSA Staff (for internal use only)

Introduction

MOLSA believes in the value of good relations with the media and also in the importance of the media in ensuring accurate reporting on MOLSA policies and programs. We need the media to help gain support, locally and internationally, for the work of MOLSA.

*In their encounters with the press, MOLSA staff members should be guided by the following three principles: **be friendly, be helpful, and be factual**. There is no reason not to speak with journalists. Obtain prior permission from your manager. Use the nominated MOLSA spokesperson.*

MOLSA has guidelines for the conduct of its staff regarding the media.

Guidelines for the MOLSA staff members:

- *Besides the minister, only the minister's senior press advisor, and/or other senior officials assigned by the minister can speak on behalf of MOLSA. The senior press advisor is responsible for setting press and public affairs policies, and is the main public voice of the ministry.*
- *If approached by journalists for an interview, please refer them to the Press and Public Affairs Office (PPAO) or the governorate public affairs officer (PAO). This allows the PPAO to assess who would be the best person to talk to the journalist. Staff members should not give interviews or make statements to the media without prior authorization from the senior press advisor or the PPAO. A PAO will always attend interviews involving a staff member.*
- *Staff members at the level of governorate offices should contact their PAOs if they have questions about press guidelines. Governorate-based offices will receive guidelines from the Head Office. If the local PAO is not available, contact the head of the governorate office or the Head Office.*
- *Staff members shall not offer opinions or comments on MOLSA policy, or speculate on issues. Do not comment on rumors. Talk only about your work within the framework of the MOLSA mandate, tasks and objectives. Be aware of the fact that there are no such things as "off the record" statements!*

- *Information given under such circumstances should not be sourced to the staff member by name, but as a "MOLSA staff member". For official comments regarding ministry policy, division of tasks between governmental organizations, agencies, etc., journalists should be referred to the PPAO.*
- *Remember that you may be perceived as representing MOLSA when not at work. Be aware of your surroundings and don't assume that an informal atmosphere means that others are not listening.*
- *Whether approached directly by journalists or through the intermediary of the PPAO, you are not obliged to talk to journalists if you do not wish to. In this case, make it clear to the PPAO and to the journalist. Please avoid the statement: "I am not allowed to talk to journalists". Say "I recommend that you contact someone else on this matter – speak with a MOLSA person involved with public affairs".*
- *You can always talk about your personal motivation for working at MOLSA, about your personal development and opportunities that MOLSA offers, etc.*
- *The PPAO is here to facilitate requests from the media and to accompany staff members in the course of their work. If asked about this by the media, please contact the PPAO.*
- *The PPAO depends on your specialist knowledge to answer questions from journalists. We kindly ask for your co-operation and assistance.*

Contact:

Abdula Al-Lamy, Senior Press Advisor to the Minister

Fawziya Muhsen Shatty, Director General, Press and Public Affairs Office

*Press and Public Affairs Office: Room , MOLSA HQ
Phone number: ...
E Mail address: ...*

#8 – Press Release Templates

Have template press releases prepared. Without knowing about the crisis yet, you cannot write a final press release, however, you can create some content about the ministry and its activities. You can prepare formatting and contact information and a paragraph about the ministry that should be **standard** in every press release.

Remember the top ten rules for writing effective press releases:

- *Make sure your story is newsworthy.*
- *Keep it short and to the point.*
- *Make sure the information is timely.*
- *Make sure the information is accurate.*
- *Make sure the information is relevant.*

- *Pre-position your story. Use the same technique newspapers use to attract reader interest: write an interesting headline for your story.*
- *Make sure the information is easy to read and understand.*
- *Avoid unnecessary information.*
- *Include details of a contact person.*
- *Target your efforts at the appropriate media.*

V. Putting the Mini-Plan into Context

Your crisis communications plan will contain more than just these mini-plans customized according to the functional area. Here is what the **complete** crisis communications plan will contain:

1. Mini-plans
2. Media lists
3. Standard press kits
4. The process for issuing communications to the media
5. A list of mobile-phone numbers for communications staff and other key people in the ministry

#1 – Mini-Plans

Put the mini-plan for the office of the minister on top. Then, have the deputy minister's mini-plan, then the mini-plan for each of the main departments, etc.

#2 – Media Lists at Your Fingertips

In a crisis it is important to have your updated media list in multiple formats because, depending on the emergency, you may not have access to your computer or regular files.

#3 – Press Kits Ready

Have your press kits ready in both electronic and hard copy format. Keep a supply of hard copy press kits in a remote ministry location. The kits in hard copy should all be in a folder with the ministry logo with all materials on a letterhead.

The kit will contain:

a. A fact sheet with information about your ministry including:

- The number of employees
- Names and titles of key officials
- A brief overview of the organization
- A brief description of who you are and what you do
- A brief description of main policies, programs and achievements

b. Brief history of your ministry

- c. Mission statement – this is helpful because it states your value proposition
- d. Image CD – these will be general images of your building, headquarters, and key officials.
- e. Recent press releases –It is useful to give the media some other news about the ministry, so journalists can create more context around their story. Press releases regarding the crisis will come later because you will need to write them as you learn about what happened.

Keep press kits on a remotely accessible drive if possible so that you can obtain and send them from any computer with Internet access.

Ideally, you will have all of this material available in the media section of your website. This, assuming that your server wasn't impacted by the crisis, is an effective way to be able to refer reporters to your site to obtain the pictures, background information, etc. that they need to build their story.

#4 – Process for Releasing the News

Make sure that your plan includes a clear process for issuing news. Some reporters like to get their news via email, fax or hard copy. Know their preferences.

Don't create unnecessary delays in obtaining approvals for press releases. Try to establish an emergency approval process that is fast. In a crisis speed is essential. Try to obtain permission to have one person approve the announcement. Use the Internet for communication during a time of crisis. The ministry's website enables you to instantly communicate your message to a large number of reporters and the public. Experience has shown that the moment a crisis is known by the major national media, thousands of people will access the organization's website, so this is an effective way to control the message as it is communicated. Be careful in what you communicate.

#5 - Co-worker Contact Information

Make sure that you have multiple ways to contact co-workers. Create phone lists. Have phone numbers for key people who are in essential activities. Communicating with them will also be as important as communicating with the media.

VI. Communicating When the Crisis Happens

Spokespeople should never say "no comment" to the media. If you don't know the answer, offer to try to obtain the information. In a crisis communicate frequently.

Even if this seems difficult the key is to keep communications constant so the media is not tempted to create a sensational story. This also gives you more opportunities to control the message.

Communicate the news locally first, then to the national and international news. Many national and international news sources monitor regional news feeds for important breaking stories. They will automatically find big or compelling stories. Working immediately and diligently with the local media means that you have a

better chance of controlling your messages. The national and international press may have already found components of the story from local reporters.

Build strong relationships with the local media ***before the crisis happens***. This ensures that when a crisis does occur, your media contacts are likely to be more respectful of the range of issues that you are trying to address. It also adds to your credibility. In a crisis situation, they will need your input.

Reporters attempt to build their reputation as well as reporting on major stories. Guidelines for developing good relations with journalists include:

GET TO KNOW THE JOURNALISTS

- ***RELATIONSHIPS*** are the basis of good media handling.
- *Journalists do not have an obligation to use your press releases.*
- ***Don't***: dislike, or patronize journalists!
- ***THINK!*** What reporters do or cover? E.g. National? Freelance?

PRINCIPLES

- ***REGULAR CONTACT*** – they are people, not only “media”.
- ***SUBSTANCE*** – Know your subject and the proper types of messages to use; Have something to say of human interest.
- ***INTEGRITY*** – Build trust
- ***A GOOD STORY*** – is a story that people will read.

PRACTICALITIES

- ***CONTROL*** your contacts with the journalists.
- ***TERMINOLOGY***: be careful with using specific terminology, such as “On the record/On background/On deep background/Off the record” or “Sound Bites”.
- ***SERVE***: Help with something they want – when you don't need anything in return.
- ***THINK*** How does the journalist see the issue?
- ***MAKE IT EASY***: Have Headlines/ A Summary for press releases and answers to media queries! Keep it clear and simple!
- ***VISUAL*** – create photo-opportunities, but with substance
- ***PRACTICAL*** – in addressing the media, make differences between live-recorded or edited interviews, or between local and national media organizations
- ***DEADLINES***: Know them! Keep them!

VII. Final Advice

Remember: major mistakes that can happen in times of crises:

1. We don't have time to develop a crisis plan. Many organizations ignore crisis planning because senior management gives a low priority to events that they are certain “won't happen here”. Then, when a crisis happens, the organization is unprepared. Poor media planning can have a very bad impact on the ministry and officials.

- 2. We aren't sure who will do what in an emergency.** A lack of role clarity creates confusion at a time when many people are demanding answers. Any organization must know in advance who will communicate with key audiences such as employees, the public, neighbours, legislators and the news media.
- 3. We have a plan, but we don't know if it will work.** A common mistake is to create a plan that is not properly understood, reviewed and updated. A plan needs to be tested frequently.
- 4. Legal action may follow, so let's not say anything publicly.** Litigation may follow a crisis. In a crisis, saying "no comment" may give the wrong impression about the organization. Use the phrase: "This is what we can confirm at this time."
- 5. Regarding the news media as more important than your own employees.** Do not be influenced by pressure from journalists. Communicate with employees. Then communicate with the media. Employees want to learn important news – good or bad – from their employer, and preferably from their immediate supervisor, not from the media.
- 6. We'll handle the news media at the right time.** It is possible to prepare for the day when a crisis may occur. Any organization can identify likely scenarios that may attract significant media attention. Reporters' questions can be anticipated and basic answers can be prepared in advance. Decide who will speak for the organization. Media training is an essential tool. Training prepares the minister or other officials to answer difficult questions. It can also identify a potential spokesperson who is not effective in this role.
- 7. Ignoring the "window of opportunity."** Every crisis has a "window of opportunity." This may be a period of as few as twelve hours in which an organization is able to mitigate the negative impact of a situation. During that time, an organization can address the substance of the matter, offer sensitive and thoughtful responses to the media, families of victims and others, for example, and offer tangible responses that address the matter.

Organizations can learn valuable lessons from others. A crisis contingency plan is essential. Senior management should act; if not, the public affairs staff can make a plan alone.

A crisis communications plan should work regardless of who is leading the ministry. Anyone should be able to follow the plan. Brief the list of support spokespeople.

The crisis communications plan doesn't need to be complicated. It should be flexible enough to deal with things that you can't foresee. You will need to update the plan every year to ensure that all of the information is current and accurate. The plan should be shared with appropriate co-workers so they are prepared to act if a crisis occurs.

Anticipation of a crisis is essential. Officials and public affairs staff should periodically assess the risks of a crisis occurring and know what possible crises may be developing. They should anticipate worst-case scenarios of all possible crises, and be prepared for how the media and the public will react to news of a crisis.