

Turney's Tips
**Six Steps to Preparing a Rudimentary
Crisis Communication Plan**

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Crisis planning is like buying insurance.

There are people – usually those who've never faced an organizational crisis – who say preparing a crisis plan is a waste of time because it involves doing a lot of work getting ready for something that may never happen. And, these nay-sayers quickly add, if they are developed, most crisis plans just sit unused on a shelf or in a drawer gathering dust. There's some truth in this, but consider the following.

Most of us purchase automobile accident insurance even though we're statistically more likely to not have an accident than to have one. So, buying insurance is also a way of planning for something that may not happen, and most auto insurance policies sit in drawers gathering dust. Despite this, clear-thinking drivers do not forego car insurance, and knowledgeable communicators do not try to get by without a crisis communication plan. Both are sensible precautions.

Once you've decided to buy insurance or to prepare a crisis communication plan, another sensible precaution is to prepare for the worst case scenario. Just as wise car-owners get enough insurance to cover medical bills for several injured people and totally demolished vehicles, wise communicators should plan to handle the worst possible crisis that could strike their organization. That way they'll be prepared to cope with a big disaster or less-serious incidents. It is, after all, fairly easy to scale-back and handle minor problems if you're prepared for big ones, but it can be horrendous to try to manage something worse than you anticipated.

Be sure it meets your organization's needs.

The process outlined here is neither a one-size-fits-all prescription nor a pick-the-best-template approach to planning. It will require thoughtful analysis of your organization, its environment, and its available resources. Do not expect to complete it in a couple of hours; it will take time and effort to do it right, but the result will be a crisis communication plan custom-tailored to your organization's need to maintain effective communication during difficult and challenging times.

The output from steps 1, 2, and 5 will constitute the final crisis communication plan. Output from steps 3 and 4 are notes and worksheets to complete step 5, not parts of the finished plan.

Note: There are two parts to this document: five pages in vertical format that explain the process and two in horizontal format with planning grids and space to summarize decisions.

Step 1. Clearly state the communication team's mission in a crisis.

Generally, the role of a communication unit in any organization at any time is to support and advance the organization's mission, and a fundamental tenet of strategic planning is each operating unit should have a unit-specific mission statement that is aligned with the organization's mission.

During a crisis it's even more important that the communication staff, the key managers, and anyone else representing the organization speak with one clear voice, present a consistent perspective, and avoid working at cross-purposes. Since this is the way organizational communicators should always operate, it's possible that the mission statement already in place for the communication unit may be adequate.

- **If your communication unit's existing mission statement will suffice**, move on to Step 2.
- **If you need a new or revised mission/role statement to adequately address crisis situations**, start with your organization's overall mission statement and any other more-specific mission, role, goal, or purpose statements dealing with communication functions. Whether this is one or several documents, they're probably written in broad terms reflecting an optimistic view that everything is running smoothly for the organization. A more appropriate perspective for a new statement is that total chaos is looming, everything is going to hell, and the crisis communication team is striving to help the organization stave off chaos and get back on solid footing.

Remember, however, that communicators are not responsible for resolving crises. That's management's job. The communicators' job is to inform the organization's publics about what happened, what is going to happen, and why. It is also to keep management aware of what those publics are thinking and saying.

Step 2. Identify your organization's most critical publics and themes to emphasize in communicating with each of them.

If your organization's strategic plan includes a comprehensive list of all the publics with whom it wants to communicate, it can be a good starting point. But, whether you start with a strategic plan or compile a list of critical publics from scratch, don't try to be comprehensive. Don't list all of your organization's publics; only those likely to be important during a crisis. These might include:

- employees;
- stockholders, if applicable;
- news media.
- those who use your products or services;
- those at or near the crisis site, if it has a location;
- government officials and/or other regulators;

Your list could be very different depending on the nature and size of your organization, the complexity and intensity of its relationships, and the types of crisis situation it's most likely to encounter. It may exclude some of those listed above but include others unique to your organization. Or, you might choose to sub-divide some broad publics, such as employees, into several smaller but more specific publics, such as separating salaried and hourly employees or full-time and part-time employees or those who work in the main corporate office and those working in branch offices.

Many crisis communication plans target three to eight publics, but there's no "magic number" right for everyone. Include whatever publics best suit your organization's needs regardless of how many this is.

Step 3. Determine where crisis communication team members will be needed and the location of any special operations centers.

Depending on their size and management structure, many organizations will need crisis communicators in multiple locations, even if some perform nearly identical duties. These are among the most common locations where communicators may be assigned during a crisis.

- **Crisis site**, if it is an actual physical location. However, many very serious crises, e.g., alleged wrong-doing and financial scandals, will not have an actual site. Keep in mind that this could be a dangerous location and/or have rescue/repair work underway that must not be curtailed.
- **Emergency operations center (EOC)** if the nature of the organization and the crisis warrant it. EOC's are often established to handle law enforcement situations, natural disasters, or on-going incidents such as fires or environmental clean-ups. They bring as many key decision-makers as possible to a single, well-equipped site so they can work together on resolving the crisis. An EOC is a problem-solving, management tool, and decisions about opening and running one rest with the CEO and other top managers, not the communication team. However, every organization involved in the crisis is likely to want its own communicator(s) in the EOC. Wherever it is, it needs to be accessible to those authorized to be in it but secure against unauthorized entry to minimize unnecessary people milling around and getting in the way. And, it needs to be ready for instant activation to fully accommodate everything that will need to be done there.
- **Main administrative offices of the organization** where the top managers are making important decisions to resolve the crisis. In addition to its inherent importance, this is a default location where reporters are likely to come seeking information.
- **Public relations or communication offices** need at least a skeleton crew even if most of the action is happening elsewhere. This is because many publics, including the media, are used to getting information here and may try to do so even if they're asked to go elsewhere in the event of a crisis.
- **Crisis communication center (CCC)**, if one is established. However, the organization's regular public relations or communication office can often serve this purpose, unless it's too small or ill-equipped to handle all of the extra people who may be brought in to assist or is inappropriate for other reasons. It is basically a work area limited to members of the communication team.
- **Media center**, if one is established. This is a one-stop location for the media to get and disseminate full information about the crisis. It should have rooms for news conferences and interviews as well as a large workspace equipped with Internet access, phones, copy and fax machines, background information, and refreshments where reporters can work and file stories. A media center is strongly recommended and is very convenient for both the media and the communication team because it helps confine news-gathering activities to a single location. Some experts suggest that it be very close to the crisis site, the EOC, or the main offices to be convenient for the media. Others urge that it be in a "neutral location" some distance away so inquisitive reporters don't get in the way or inadvertently slow down the crisis resolution.
- **Field offices, branch production facilities**, and other locations where the organization has employees or does business depending upon the nature of the crisis and the organizational culture.

Step 4. Define task-related communication roles needed in a crisis.

The number and variety of roles on a crisis communication team depend on the organization's size, location(s), and type of business as well as the nature of the crisis. Except for major corporations with huge communication staffs, a regular communication staff is rarely large enough to do everything that's needed during a crisis. Most organizations will have to "draft" additional people from other departments, contract external consultants, or hire temporaries from a service bureau. Thus, the skills, backgrounds, and availability of the current communication staff should not factor into defining crisis roles/positions.

- **A crisis communication plan must cover everything that needs to be done. Don't limit it to current employees or their normal job titles and duties.**

Common crisis communication roles	Note how many of each position are needed & where they'll be stationed
Crisis manager liaison sits in on meetings of upper-level managers who make the decisions and direct the operations intended to resolve the crisis and keeps the rest of the communication team updated.	
Employee liaison keeps employees (and sometimes their families) fully informed of what's happening.	
Spokesperson publicly announces all new developments, explains the organization's positions, and handles all media interviews.	
Media facilitator assists reporters in getting to/from the crisis site, arranges interviews, provides background information, etc.	
Investor & financial community liaison may be needed by a publicly-traded company especially if its stock price is volatile or its financial future is uncertain.	
Writer/researcher/fact checker assists the spokesperson and media facilitator in gathering and preparing information for release.	
Call and e-mail screeners review and appropriately route crisis-related messages that come in to the public relations office, emergency phone lines or e-mail addresses, and the main switchboard.	
On-site monitor at the actual crisis scene observes and reports developments for the crisis manager liaison and the spokesperson.	
You may make notes of any other roles or positions that are needed on the back of this page.	

Step 5. Prepare a crisis communication team roster showing your “starting line-up” with contact information.

Once likely operational locations are set in step 3 and task-related roles are determined in step 4, translate them into a list of specific “positions” completing the first two columns of the “Starting Line-Up” grid. As in previous steps, do not be constrained by the grid on the template page. Add as many additional columns, rows, or pages as needed to meet your organization’s needs.

Then identify specific people who can fill each position, but do so knowing that there will probably not be enough communication staff to cover all of them. It may be necessary to borrow additional staff from other departments or make arrangements for outside assistance.

- To ensure clarity, everyone named in the line-up should be identified by current job title and the department in which they work.
- Many experienced planners think line-ups evolve most smoothly if all first choice selections (the center two columns of the grid) are completed before selecting back-ups and substitutes.
- Once the preferred starting line-up seems settled, go through the positions once again and add at least one competent back-up or substitute for each position (the two right hand columns). This is the absolute minimum; some planners prefer three or more back-ups for each position.
- In addition to office phone numbers and e-mail addresses, contact information should include cell phone, home phone, and pager numbers as well as any other contact method that will ensure these people can be reached 24/7.

Step 6. Disseminate the plan and regularly update it.

Don't wait until a crisis to disseminate the plan. It won't be much help unless those who need to use it are familiar with it and have it instantly accessible. Everyone listed in the plan should have copies of it as well as having additional fact sheets and contact lists relevant to their specific assignments. And, since the contact information for these people is critical but likely to change frequently, someone will have to keep all these plans updated because it's imperative that contact information be current and accurate.

For additional information . . .

Communicating in a Crisis published by Chevron Corporate Communications; San Francisco; 1991.

Communicating in Crisis by Michel Ogrizek & Jean-Michel Guillery (translated from French by Helen Kimball-Brooke & Robert Z. Brooke); Aldine DeGruyter: Hawthorne, New York; 1999.

Communicating when Your Company Is Under Siege by Marion K. Pinsdorf; Fordham University Press: New York; (3rd edition) 1999.

The Crisis Counselor by Jeffrey R. Caponigro; Barker Business Books: Southfield, Michigan; 1998.

A Rudimentary Crisis Communication Plan

(Format developed by Michael Turney; see *Six Steps to Preparing...* for directions)

The communication unit's mission when the organization is facing a crisis is to ... _____

Key publics	This public's importance & themes to emphasize in talking to it?

If special operations centers are to be used they will be located as follows.

Emergency operations center (EOC) location:
(admission restricted to key decision-makers)

Media center location:
(open and accessible to reporters and media personnel)

Crisis communication center location:
(work area limited to organizational communicators)
