Crisis Communications
- Preparing for a Crisis
July 2024

Contents

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Document purpose

The purpose of this document is to act as a guide for those responsible for crisis communications of all of the tasks they might have to carry out prior (preparedness), during (response) and after (recovery) an incident.

The document has been broken down into different sections, looking at how organisations in any sector, both public and private, can prepare themselves, from a communication perspective, to be able to respond to an issue or a crisis. The document considers what those who may have to handle crisis communications can do to prepare for such events that will enable the response phase to run more effectively.

Whilst not every task needs to be carried out by a crisis communications person, most of the tasks will likely need to be carried out during an incident and they should therefore be allocated to someone.

When considering Crisis Communications it is important to remember that there are multiple benefits to having planned on how you will communicate in a crisis. Firstly Crisis Communications can encompass a Warning and Informing aspect, where information put out in the public domain can assist in the safety and well-being of individuals. Secondly, there is the reputational impact that a crisis or issue could have, handling communications properly can help to protect this.

It is recognised that different organisations will have differing capabilities and capacities. The Communications Team may be an individual, a small team or a larger team, some will have external support from Public Relations companies or consultants others will not. The Communications Team is likely to be geared towards day-to-day business and less so to handling crises and emergencies. This document is intended to assist those teams in handling those situations that they may not normally come across.

This document has been developed by the Emergency Planning Society (EPS), Communications Professional Working Group based on their collective experience in preparing for and responding to, issues, crises and national emergencies.

The Communications Professional Working Group is formed from EPS Members who have worked across emergency planning and resilience across a broad range of sectors in both the public and private sectors, working for small businesses through to multi-national corporates as well as Third Sector organisations and Governments.

Document Scope

The checklist is written from a UK viewpoint but much of it will be relevant worldwide. This checklist applies equally to the public as well as the private sector.

Different organisations will have different structures in place to deal with communications and crisis communications and whatever is put in place should be bespoke and suitable to individual organisations. This document provides guidance and does not constitute specific professional advice. It is important to put the specific professional advice in place. The EPS and its employees do not accept or assume any liability, esponsibility or duty of care for any consequences of acting in reliance, or refraining from action, on the information contained in this publication or for decision based upon it.

Crisis Communications Lead

A Crisis Communications Lead should be identified within the organisation. They will have the responsibility for ensuring that the organisation is ready to manage a crisis and that adequate preparation is carried out including as appropriate all pre-incident actions laid out in this document.

A Crisis Communications Lead is a key role that should be part of the Crisis Management Team. Communications, be that from a warning and informing basis, or from a reputational point of view, form a strategic part of any response.

They will also lead the Response to any incident or crisis in terms of Communications. This means that they should have oversight of communications, both internal and external, ensuring a consistent message and narrative.

Their responsibility is to ascertain and provide relevant information to those that need it thus ensuring dissemination of facts, support and instruction to protect people, the environment, assets and the organisation's reputation.

They will work closely with other teams or individuals within the organisation including the Business Continuity Lead / Team and any Crisis Management Team. Within any Crisis Management Team (CMT), the Crisis Communications Lead should have a position, reporting to the CMT.

They should not look to do every task themselves, ensuring a supporting structure is in place, and delegating tasks where possible and appropriate, however, they do need an oversight of what is being said about the organisation and the messaging the organisation is putting out.

Preparedness

This section outlines what the Crisis Communication Lead or Team can do before an issue, crisis or emergency to help ensure that they are prepared and able to respond.

Outlined below are several tasks, under sub-headings, that need to be considered.

Tasks can be assigned to individuals and it is important to ensure there is a sign-off method. Someone within the organisation should have overall responsibility for Preparedness activities.

Within every organisation, a senior manager, if not a board member, should have the designated responsibility to ensure that the organisation is ready to manage a crisis and that adequate preparation is carried out including as appropriate all pre-incident actions. There should be support for this work from the top of the organisation.

The following tables outline what organisations can and should do to help it be prepared. Whilst this can be tailored to the size and structure of the organisation, having the following in place can greatly increase an organisation's resilience to a crisis, enabling it to handle communications and ultimately protect its reputation.

Risk Assessments

Risk assessments enable organisations to identify issues, risks, and threats (referred to as risks here on in) that may occur and consider how they may prevent those from happening but also to minimise the impacts of the issues or risks should they occur.

Every risk will have a communications aspect to it. The risk may require time-critical safety information that needs to be shared with regulators, emergency services, and government bodies. Additionally, it may attract the attention of local or national media, it may become a topic on social, alternatively, it may require communications with shareholders or employees. Understanding what the risks are, and what the consequences are, will better prepare you to respond.

From a Crisis Communications perspective, a risk assessment can assist in identifying;
    a) the potential reputational impacts of the materialisation of an issue or risk on the organisation.
    b) the possible Warning and Informing activities that the risk may warrant.
    c) the internal and external communications that may be required in response to a risk.

Organisations should therefore:
- Carry out horizon scanning, looking to identify issues and risks that could impact their organisation.
- Regularly monitor issues to ensure they don't mature into a crisis.
- Ensure the Communications function of the organisation is engaged in Risk Management processes across the business.

Crisis Communications Team

A Crisis Communication Team can take many forms, all tailored to the uniqueness of the organisation it is supporting. The Crisis Communication Team should support whoever is responsible for planning for an incident with expert help and advice on what communications may be needed as well as protecting the reputation of an organisation during a crisis.

A Crisis Communications Team may consist of the Communication / Public Relations Team as well as support from elsewhere in the organisation. It may also include external support, from specialists who handle crises regularly.

For large or multi-national organisations, the Crisis Communications Team may be spread across different locations, however, there is still a necessity for central control and consistent messaging (tailored to the locality). Across time zones this can be challenging but not insurmountable if processes and protocols are in place.

The Crisis Communications Team should have clearly dedicated roles and responsibilities within it, including deputies who can step into a role at short notice or, direction as to who would fulfil roles in the absence of someone. It would be prudent to consider who else within the organisation could be called upon to assist in a crisis. These people should be identified and trained in the role they would fulfil during a crisis.

In smaller organisations the Crisis Communications Team can be a single individual, communications may not be their normal day job either. In these situations planning and preparation can be key, having key templates ready and a process in place will assist. If there are individuals who will assist, ensure they are identified and are familiar with the process in place and what they need to do.

The Crisis Communications Team should have access to, or have at least identified, additional, possibly external, support that may be required. This should include a suitably qualified person to provide legal advice to the team should it be required. This person may be on call or may be part of the team or wider organisation. Additional support may be in the form of a specialist reputational management and public relations company.

Any external support should be documented, including their roles and responsibilities and out-of-hours contact details. Ideally, an organisation would practice working with them during training and exercises.

Should the organisation have operations in multiple countries, it is important that the Crisis Communications Team:
- Are conscious of different time zones within which they operate and be sensitive to different cultures in those locations.
- Has an awareness of the different media outlets within the geographies.
- Understand the communications culture and how that may differ from where the head office is.
- Understand how incidents are managed within that country and the process and protocol in place.
- What languages the organisation may need to communicate in, and how translation will be completed.
- Be aware of the role the local emergency services / agencies may take on, in relation to communicating emergency information.

Crisis Communications Plan

A Crisis Communications Plan must be prepared within the organisation. This document should contain all key and specific information as well as processes, teams, personnel etc. Crucially, this document needs to be assessable, it should be written in a way where it can be picked up and used in an emergency quickly and easily.

A Crisis Communications Plan should include the following material and information. Outlined below is a description of what could be included in a Crisis Communications Plan and a brief description of what should be in that section of the Plan.

- What is a crisis? – *Explain what a crisis may consist of for the organisation, it may be helpful to categorise the types of crises the organisation could face.*
- Business Purpose and Values Statement – *A prompt and reminder about the purpose and values of the organisation which should assist in an organisation's approach and response.*
- Crisis Communications Team – *An outline of the individual Roles within the Crisis Communications Teams and the hierarchy of how the team fits together*
- Roles and Responsibilities – *A clear description of what each of the Roles does and what their responsibilities include during the response to a crisis, this should also include who engages (and how) with any separate Crisis Management Team*
- Activation Process and Protocols – *A clear protocol as to the types of situations where the Crisis Communication Team would be activated and a process of how the Team is assembled. Additionally, thresholds at which external support should be notified / activated and how this is done.*
- Media Handling Process – *A clear process for how calls from the media should be handled should they not be received by the Communications Team.*
- NOK / Community / Handling Process – *A clear process for how calls from these parties should be handled, what information should be taken and where they should be directed.*
- Communications Governance / Sign-off – *A clear process of how Communications (internal and external) would be approved during a crisis, including Holding Lines.*
- Spokespeople – *A simple list of those in the organisation who have been media trained and could speak to the media if required.*
- Key Stakeholders – *An outline of who the key stakeholders for the organisation could be during a crisis (Internal / External (inc. suppliers, customers, partners, regulators etc.)).*

As part of the Crisis Communications Plan, it can be useful to have an Annex which contains further detailed information that can be referred to throughout responding to an issue.

Within the Annex the following should be considered.

- Media Enquiries Log Template – *A template to ensure media enquiries are captured consistently and correctly with key information.*
- Media and Social Media Log Template – *A simple template that enables media coverage to be captured, analysed and circulated to the Crisis Communications / Management Team that highlights the key headlines, journalists and crucially the tone of media and social media coverage.*
- Interview Checklist – *A simple brief that can be used immediately before an interview, should include key details about the interview as well as key messages and Lines To Take.*
- Guidelines for Spokespeople – *It can be useful to have a short one-pager within the Crisis Communications Plan, so it is easily accessible, with some key reminders for people talking to the media.*
- Inclusive Comms Checklist – *Key reminders about language and tone, different languages required, accessibility requirements (e.g. subtitles, sign language etc.)*
- Key Contacts – *Key contacts (that should be updated regularly) including team members and others within the organisation that would be critical (e.g. those who can sign off statements), as well as external organisations.*
- Risks and draft statements – *A section outlining the risks that have come out of any risk assessment and any draft media statements and holding lines that have been prepared that may assist in the creation of a statement for use.*
- Stakeholder Management Plan – *outlining who is talking to whom, about what aspects, how frequently and what channel e.g. email or phone should be used to contact them.*
- Company Info and Asset Details – *Key company stats (up to date) and information that may be helpful during a response.*
- Debrief Template – *to ensure that what worked well, what was done differently and changes made, and what should be done differently in future, can be captured.*

External Communications

When considering External Communications that may be required, it is essential that planning takes place so the organisation knows and understands who their external stakeholders are (both individual organisations / people etc) and how they can best reach those people.

External communications range from the media, your channels on social platforms, to speaking to key stakeholders (including regulators) and those affected by whatever has occurred. Depending on the type of crisis, different external communications will be needed.

Where an organisation may have partners, suppliers of goods and services or other agencies involved in the incident or could have caused the incident, agree in advance how communications will be coordinated. They might be invited to have a representative on your response team, provide a liaison officer, or have pre-agreed channels of communication. This could include the development of a 'bridging' document.

An organisation should:
● Develop plans for communicating with all interested parties at short notice, prioritising the communication to the most affected people if required.
● Ensure you have an understanding of the channels that are available to the organisation for communicating, including existing social channels as well as individual relationships that could be used.
● Ensure there are updated contact lists for all of these that may need communicating with and this includes out-of-hours numbers where appropriate.
● Ensure you are aware of all other external communications, including Marketing campaigns and social media activities – these may have to be stopped during an incident.
● Develop a customer communication plan. This may include being able to segment lists of customers and contacting vulnerable customers.

Media Engagement

Media engagement during an emergency can be crucial. A vacuum is often created in emergencies where organisations haven't commented, these vacuums are then filled with 'experts' or speculation. Understanding how your organisation will respond to media in a crisis is key to maintaining the reputation of an organisation. Never underestimate the value of a holding line, it can not be expected that you know all the details about what has happened instantly, but ensuring people know that a) you are aware of it and, b) you are responding to it, can go a long way.

Handling the media during a crisis can be tough, there is a need to ensure there is a consistent underlying narrative used by the organisation, with tailored individual messages to different audiences. Additionally, there needs to be an analysis of who is saying what about your organisation and the current situation, enabling you to respond and rebut misinformation. Key decisions have to be made about when to issue statements, when to rebut inaccurate information, if to give any interviews and if so who should do it.

Understanding which journalists write about your organisation or your sector will be helpful. Knowing who they are and what they say, and having an existing relationship with them can all help. However, in an emergency, it could be any journalist writing about the crisis or emergency and they may not know your sector. It should also be noted that whilst having a good relationship with a journalist is helpful, a good relationship will not stop the journalist from writing what they consider to be a news story.

An organisation should:
- Ensure there is a single point of sign-off for statements and communication strategies to ensure consistent external communications.
- Ensure there is a process in place to monitor media around an emergency, collate media enquiries and ensure these get to the identified team as quickly as possible.
- Identify who could be a spokesperson, and the situations individuals may be used in, for an emergency and ensure they have had some media training.
- Practice briefing spokespersons who will carry media and external interviews.
- Ensure that there is a process in place that enables the timely sign-off statements and internal and external messaging before they are sent off. This could be designated to several individuals or a group and should come from top management.
- Prepare draft holding lines against Risk Registers that are signed off to help expediate the process of developing into statements during response.

An organisation could additionally:
- Identify external organisations that could support you during a crisis with media engagement including a Media Call Centre if necessary and the risks may result in a large volume of calls.
- Ensuring there are sufficient media-trained people including senior managers, technical experts and covering the geography of the organisation.
- Develop a procedure for running press conferences, have thought through where these might take place and have identified equipment and facilities where they could be held.

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Social Media

Social media platforms can be used during an emergency for key messages, statements to the media etc. Organisations need to understand what social media channels they have and how these may, if appropriate, be utilised during an emergency. New channels set up to respond to an event are unlikely to be effective however, if organisations have channels already set up, they should consider if and how they use their existing channels.

Organisations should also be wary of campaigns they currently have running on any social media channels. Does the campaign in any way impact on the crisis? Would continuing the current campaign be deemed 'acceptable' by the general public if it continued during a response?

Where social media activities are outsourced then think through and document how this role will be carried out during an incident, at short notice and out of hours.

Social media can also be used to gauge reactions and opinions of the organisation during the response to an event. Organisations should therefore understand their social media channels and their 'followers', ensuring that the correct weighting is given to opinions aired on social media. In the event of a crisis, journalists and the general public are likely to look at your social media channels to gauge response, reactions and current opinions of you.

Social media also provides an opportunity for an organisation to directly engage with people, be that by correcting misinformation directly, sign-posting information, for example, " Our latest statement is on our website which can be found here." or, informing about what actions are needed from the general public.

An organisation should:
- Have a clear process and guidance on when social media should be considered for use during a crisis, what channels the organisation have at their disposal, and draft messaging (consistent with other messaging) specifically for social media use.
- Ensure that any Crisis Communications Team is regularly informed and consulted on social media campaigns and any advertising to ensure they don't cause an incident or inflame a situation.
- Have ongoing monitoring of social media, identify trends and understand what 'normal' traffic looks like, as well as looking out for false or misleading information.
- Include social media when looking at the identification of issues which could develop into a crisis
- Try and build an audience on channels that would and can be seen as the trusted voice of the organisation.
- Ensure that policies relating to the use of social media etc are current and regularly reviewed.

Regulators

A lot of organisation have regulators and an organisation must understand at what point they need to inform the regulator of an incident and what communication is expected with the regulator during response and recovery. This role should be clearly defined and assigned to someone who knows what the regulators and the regulations that you abide by.

> Organisations should ensure that they have:
> ● Catalogued all statutory, regulatory and contractual notifications, including when they should be notified, what type of incidents require their notification, their information requirements and who within the organisation should be notified.
> ● Practice informing these organisations during exercises.

Website

Your website will be a source of information in an emergency, media particularly will use it to look for information and statements but also, depending on the type of issue, others may use it as well. It is key to making sure that you understand how your website can be used but also how alterations can be made quickly.

Organisations should review and develop a plan for how the website can be used during different types of incidents. This could include the development of 'dark pages' which can be activated and used to host incident information.

Organisations should also be aware that any phone numbers on their website could be used for those seeking information. It is therefore essential that those who answer these numbers are provided with a process on exactly what they need to do. The numbers could be, for example, called by concerned relatives who want to know if their loved ones have been impacted by the emergency, alternatively, they could be used by journalists seeking the company's opinion.

> An organisation should:
> ● Ensure their website can be updated, including out-of-hours, and at short notice.
> ● Ensure they have traffic monitoring in place, most likely through their provider, on their website to spot signs of issues.
> ● In a cyber incident an organisation's website may be unavailable due to the attack. Think through how an alternative website may be made available at short notice.

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Internal Communications

Internal Communications are as important as external communications, it is essential that an organisation has identified what would be communicated, to who and by whom, when and crucially how. Existing channels to staff could be used or certain situations may require a different approach. Many organisations will not have everyone in a single space, so understanding what channels are available and how to make the best use of technology available will enable the organisation to plan better.

When considering the risks that an organisation could face, consider what internal communications may be required as part of the response.

An organisation should:
- Ensure that communication can be delivered to all staff at short notice.
- Have processes and protocols in place, including sign-off procedures, concerning internal communication during an emergency or crisis.
- Consider having formatted templates in place for internal communications. This should include space for the internal message needed as well as phone numbers to pass on for media or other stakeholders to call and a reminder not to share any unauthorised information or speculation regarding the situation.
- Ensure that personal contact details, including personal mobile phones (if appropriate), are up-to-date and accessible through the appropriate means and by the right people, should they be needed at short notice.
- Ensure that appropriate channels are in place to contact all staff, and review what are staff information requirements during an incident. ensure that this is documented.
- Identify key touch points that need information as a priority, for example, customer services teams, outreach workers, call handlers etc.
- Consider the use of a notification system so that mass messages can be sent out to staff if appropriate.
- As part of any exercise, consider internal communications, testing the processes and procedures.
- Consider conducting an exercise that tests contacting all staff and checking messages are delivered and understood.

Training and exercising

All organisations should train and exercise against their crisis communication plans and involve relevant external suppliers and third parties. Training is particularly important for those whose day-to-day work differs from what they would do in the event of a crisis. They must be familiar with their role, the processes and what they should look to be doing.

Exercising can take many forms, but the processes and procedures should be tested to ensure they work effectively and efficiently. Lessons should be identified after every exercise and where changes for the better can be implemented they should be, including updating any plan. Any crisis communication exercise can take place on its own or, in connection with a wider exercise.

Organisations should ensure that:
● Staff receive training in their incident role, especially those who do not carry out their incident role as part of their 'day job', at least once every couple of years, more regularly if there are new members of staff who have a role.
● Communications teams should consider separate communication exercises if possible, which focus them on carrying out their role and developing communications collateral. The communications team should exercise its roles and responsibilities at least once a year. This could be through a tabletop exercise with bigger exercises, involving the Crisis Management Team, for example, occurring less often.
● When appropriate ensure that any crisis communications specialists, specified to assist in this type of situation, is invited to exercise.
● Try to mix up the roles during training or exercising, ensuring those who are deputies get training in a role they may have to step into.
● Consider training staff in different communication techniques which can be used for effectively conveying internal and external information.
● Consider specific Crisis Media Training, for those who may have to develop messaging during a crisis and those who may be spokespeople. This training should take place as soon as possible.
● Following any exercise or training, plans should be updated to ensure that any lessons are captured and embedded.

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External suppliers

External suppliers can assist organisations in both preparedness and response. These are likely to be separate from your normal public relations provider if you have one. Crisis communications is very different from normal public relations so ensure that you have checked the experience in this area. It may be appropriate to have a retainer with a specialist organisation or, alternatively, if you have identified a company speak to them about being able to provide that service as and when needed and if possible, ensure they know your process and procedures. It may be that the company can carry out a risk assessment and write crisis communication protocols, procedures and plans.

Additional organisations could identify a legal firm that knows your sector well or is a specialist in your sector if it is regulated. Additionally, once you have identified risks, there may be the need to identify specific companies that may be needed in any response phase.

Organisations should:
- If appropriate, identify and engage the services of an external specialist Communications / Public Relations company.
- Ensure whoever you have has an awareness of your organisation's plans, procedures and culture.
- Ensure that they are involved in training and exercises, ideally as a participant although some specialists will also put together the exercise for you.
- Consider if you need to make arrangements for a media call centre facility, this could be in-house or outsourced.
- Ensure that there is a suitably qualified person to provide legal advice to the team. They may be on call or may be part of the team.
- Document their roles and responsibilities and practice working with them during training and exercises.
- Ensure that 24/7 contact details for any external resource are available and have the details in your plans and the support they can offer.

Brand and organisation culture

Organisations should always be aware of their brand and organisation culture. When responding in a crisis be aware of the brand guidelines and the image of the brand, values and culture and the organisation's culture.

This should form the basis of communication, wary of the situations and adjusted accordingly.

Always remember the purpose of your organisation and what you are trying to achieve. Ensuring that is reflected in what is done, for example, prioritising customers in the values should drive the activity.

Additionally, communications in a crisis can often take on a different style or tone than the one the organisation would use normally. Consider whether your normal style and tone is appropriate, messaging needs to come from the organisation and changing it may make the organisation feel distant from the event. The exception to this is if your tone is normally humorous, rarely does this work in a crisis situation, although there are a few examples of it doing so.

About the Emergency Planning Society

For over 30 years, the Emergency Planning Society (EPS) has been the forefront of resilience in the UK. The organisation empowers individuals, communities, and organizations to navigate the ever-changing world of emergency management. Through expert guidance, professional development, and advocacy, the Society bridges the gap between theory and practice, ensuring effective responses to any crisis. Whether it's floods, cyberattacks, or pandemics, the EPS stands side-by-side with its members, building a safer, more resilient future for all.

The Communication Professional Working Group works to empower professionals to inform, reassure, and guide its members with strategic communication plans and expert training.

The Authors

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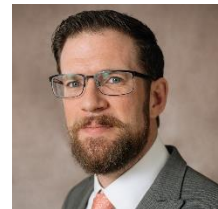
He founded Holdsworth Consultancy Ltd in 2018 following over five years at one of the UK's leading agencies where he was a specialist in crisis and reputation management and response as well as experience in other agencies.

This document has been reviewed by members of the Communication Professional Working group at the Emergency Planning Society. Particular input being provided by Amanda Coleman (Amanda Coleman Communication Ltd) and Sarah Alcock (Media & Crisis Management Ltd).

Further Reading

The members of the Communication Professional Working group can recommend the following titles for further reading on this topic.

- Crisis Communication Strategies, Amanda Coleman
- When The Dust Settles, Lucy Easthope
- Promote the Dog Sitter, Ed Conley
- Crisis Communication, Kjell Brataas

THE EMERGENCY PLANNING SOCIETY