

Communicating in a Crisis

Don't Shut Down Communication

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Learn how to communicate calmly in a crisis.

When a crisis or some other adverse situation occurs, the natural instinct is to close ranks, work furiously to contain the damage, and set the situation back to normal.

We go into protection mode – for both our organization and ourselves. However, this approach can go badly wrong.

We've all seen major companies terribly wounded when the press senses a "cover up." And we may also have seen situations where gossip has spiraled out of control with damaging results.

When official communication channels are shut down, communication does not stop. In fact it can often increase. The problem is that this communication can be full of rumor, innuendo, inconsistencies, half truths, and exaggerations. More than this, the trust and confidence of employees and clients can be undermined, with often-damaging long term consequences.

This is where the best thing to do in a crisis can be to communicate the facts and issues surrounding them clearly, quickly, and consistently.

Tip:

On one hand, life is full of ups and downs, and you'll look silly and out of control if you are often conducting crisis communication. Also, you need to be careful about communicating information that can itself damage you.

On the other hand, **trust** is essential in business. If people feel that you, your brand or your company can no longer be trusted, this can be fatal for your business. Customers may prefer to go to a more trustworthy competitor. Teamwork may break down. Employees may move jobs. And people will be more cautious in dealing with you, raising the costs of doing business.

Staying in Control

What's important in a crisis is to stay in control of communication. These five Cs of communication that can help when communicating bad news:

1. **Concerns** – focus attention on the needs and concerns of the audience. Don't make the message focused on you or on damage control. Where appropriate, acknowledge the concerns of the people and deal with them directly.
2. **Clarity** – where possible, leave no room for improper assumptions or best guesses. The clearer your message is, the more people will believe you are disclosing everything they need to know. When communication is vague it implies that you are hiding something or only revealing partial truths.
3. **Control** – remain in control of what is being said. When you lose control of the message there is no stopping the flow of inaccurate information. Your whole communication plan needs to center on remaining in control.
4. **Confidence** – your message and delivery must assure your listeners that the actions you are taking are in everyone's best interests. It's one thing to deliver bad news openly, and it's another to effectively convey that you are doing everything you can to minimize the negative impact. Speak with confidence but don't lose sight of your humanity – acknowledge that you can't make everything ok, but make sure people know you're doing your best.
5. **Competence** – convey the notion that you are able to handle the situation and that you have the advice and support of many people (and, of course, make sure that you do). When you use the 5 Cs you assure people that you are competent to handle the situation and that you are not being deceitful in any way. This reinforces people's belief in your ability to manage the situation the best way you know how.

By using the 5 Cs you contain the message of what you want said. If people are getting adequate, honest, and open information from you then they are less inclined to go searching for their own version of the truth.

Practicing Crisis Communication

These guidelines can help when communicating in the midst of a crisis or when anticipating a crisis will happen.

Develop a Crisis Communication Plan

As a matter of routine, identify risks, prepare for worst case scenarios, run "what if" analyses, and choose the set of actions that address your **stakeholders'** needs most effectively. If you've done this **contingency planning** in advance, when a crisis does occur, you'll have well thought-through responses already in place.

Use a Crisis Communication Team

Establish a crisis communication team if risks are serious or communication needs are significant. This team should consist of high-level officials in the organization. Their role is to assess the nature and scope of the situation by consulting with others as required.

Appoint a Spokesperson

This person should be chosen from those who have the most direct knowledge of the situation – typically the highest-ranking person of the group. The more direct involvement the spokesperson has, the higher his or her credibility, which enhances the confidence and competence factors for effective bad-news communication.

Tip:

If your spokesperson is likely to face the **media**, make sure, if you can, that the spokesman has had interview training well in advance, and that he or she has rehearsed key messages and answers to likely questions (see below).

Create a Sheet of Facts

Draft a summary statement that includes all the appropriate details. Balance the information with respect to the stakeholders' right to know and the company's needs for privacy. This sheet is used to ensure the messages you give are consistently accurate.

Establish Your Key Message

Decide the most important message you want to convey. Tailor the rest of your communication around this message. Make sure that the key message has the right tone and provides the right context for delivering the message.

Anticipate Questions

Before you finalize your key message try to think of all the questions you will get and address as many of them as you can in your communication package.

Determine the Communication Channels

Decide how you are going to convey your message:

- What needs to be told in person – either live or through a media channel?
- If you choose to use the media, how will this be coordinated?
- Do you want to use a press conference?
- Do you need a crisis hotline?

Also:

- Consider using your website as well as email and social media channels to deliver messages quickly and efficiently.
- Advise your switchboard how to handle inquiries.
- Determine how/if phones and faxes will be used.
- Establish other communication channels as required – meetings, advertisements, and so on.

Coordinate Your Internal and External Communication

A good communications plan will release information to the media, employees, and other stakeholders at the same time. If that is not possible, ensure that your employees and other prime stakeholders find out direct from you first.

Don't Withhold Information That You Intend to Share

If you can, tell all the bad news, all at once. If you give it in spurts it can look like you're hiding things and not being totally honest. This doesn't mean you have to reveal everything: It means you have to reveal all that you need to reveal right from the start.

Be Up-Front at All Times

If you can't go into detail on something, be honest and say that you can't discuss that information at this time. If you don't know something, be honest about that too.

Be Empathic

Try to see the situation from the audience's point of view. Deliver the message with the same sensitivity you would appreciate if you were in their position. Use humble, personal language and acknowledge the emotional elements involved in the situation. Try to emphasize the positive without minimizing the negative.

Stay Calm

This is the hardest rule to follow. For the sake of everyone hearing the message, keep as calm as possible. You need to convey control, confidence, and competence.

Tip:

Our Expert Interview with Kathy McKee on [Leading People Through Disasters](#) has further tips and advice on communicating effectively in a crisis.

Key Points

Communicating during a crisis often requires candid and timely communication. Failure to communicate can severely damage trust, and can lead to rumor running out of control.

In order to remain in control, you need to deliver accurate and comprehensive messages to your stakeholders. Be prepared with a communications plan and deliver your messages calmly and confidently – your audience will appreciate your honesty and the situation will be handled much more smoothly because of it.