

**AECL-9813**

Creating a crisis plan for your organization

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Introduction

Crises are always at risk of happening to organizations, but preparation can help prevent them and limit their damage when they do occur. Being prepared helps reduce the financial and reputational blows a crisis may bring to an organization. To help manage a crisis and mitigate its repercussions, every organization should have a crisis communication plan.

What is a crisis?

A crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome for an organization, company or industry, as well as its stakeholders, products, services and reputation (Fearn-Banks, 2011). A simpler way of thinking of it is that a crisis creates shared stress on a system, whether it is an organization or a community. Crises can come in many shapes and sizes (Diers-Lawson, 2019). A crisis can be broken down into five separate stages (Fearn-Banks, 2011): detection, prevention and preparation, containment, recovery and learning:

1. Detection is characterized by the discovery of warning signs of a possible crisis.
2. Prevention measures are put in place where feasible and preparation is done where prevention is no longer feasible.
3. Containment aims to limit the length of a crisis and spread to other areas of the organization.
4. Recovery is where the organization returns to its normal state.
5. Learning is where the response to the crisis is carefully studied.

Creating a crisis plan

Although crises cannot always be anticipated, having a plan will help address the most likely scenarios your organization could face, as well as knowing which crisis roles team members will fill.

Each organization will have its own components, but there are some common elements to address: key roles within the organization, key external stakeholders who may need to be contacted or worked with, how to identify and develop plans for likely scenarios, a plan for unexpected scenarios, debriefing plans and evaluation plans, including key metrics to track before, during and after a crisis.

Identify likely scenarios

Although not every crisis can be anticipated, many can be. First, geography will dictate some of this. In Oklahoma, certain types of natural disasters happen regularly, such as tornadoes, floods, ice storms and wildfires. Next, the type of organization affects what should be planned for. For example, restaurants would plan for foodborne related illnesses, while a cattle operation would plan for livestock diseases. All organizations should have some level of physical safety measures addressed, as well as people-specific crises such as embezzlement, theft and harassment.

Plan responses for expected scenarios and a catch-all plan

Once scenarios have been identified, a plan for each of them should be developed. First, consider preventative measures. If something cannot be prevented, determine how the damage can be mitigated if the crisis occurs.

Next, once the crisis occurs, who should be doing what? The plan should have enough information that anyone can grab it and know what they should be doing. Moreover, plan for the unexpected. Even if it's just stating who to contact before taking further action, this should be noted.

Although every crisis may not happen as predicted, defining key strategic communication strategies can be prepared beforehand. Elements to these strategies should include how to work with internal and external stakeholders, what key points to communicate related to the crisis and overall strategy for engaging in communication (Diers-Lawson, 2019).

Identify key roles

Everyone in the organization should know what their role is during a crisis, even if that is to do nothing. Some communication roles that should be addressed include who is in charge during the crisis, spokesperson, internal communications and media relations. The spokesperson is especially important to help ensure consistent messaging is coming from the organization (Fearn-Banks, 2011).

There are also some practical roles that need to be established. Some are more prominent, such as who will be in charge of ensuring crisis preparation is occurring, but others might get forgotten in stress of response, such as who will ensure food and drinks are taken care of for the crisis team during the response. Include contact information for the individuals filling the organization's key roles. For everyone who is not in the plan, make sure they know to whom they should report to. Everyone should also be aware of who is and is not allowed to communicate about the crisis, as well as knowing to whom to refer media for information. Ideally, there are also backups for all roles.

Identify key external stakeholders

In addition to internal contact information, details are needed for external stakeholders. For example, a family farm may need to have neighbors, veterinarians and local emergency personnel included in the plan. A restaurant may include the local health department and suppliers. Basically, if the potential crises impacted the organization, who else needs to be informed? It may also be helpful to include local media contacts.

Debriefing

To ensure learning occurs, debriefing is necessary. This is the process of gathering information from those who were involved in the organization's crisis response to see what happened and know what unfolded. Ideally, this happens as quickly as possible. Some disaster response teams do this as they clean up to ensure details are not forgotten. For others, it may be more feasible to hold a team meeting within a day or two of the crisis or send a questionnaire to team members so they can say what they did and what they saw during the crisis.

Evaluation

The last element of the plan is evaluation. Before, during, and after the crisis there are pieces of information that can help make better decisions in the future. Beforehand, benchmark data can be collected to help understand what an organization is doing, and what could serve as a warning the crises may be on the way. During the crisis, collecting information that informs adjustments to the response and prevents damages is essential. Afterward, information to help understand how well the response to the crisis went can help limit impacts of future crises.

Testing the plan

Although a crisis is the true test of a plan, there are options that can be done ahead of time. One option is to run drills, similar to fire drills in schools. The goal is to run through a test scenario to ensure the actions that should happen do occur and to determine if there were any gaps in the planning.

Another option is to talk through the scenarios, or conduct table-top exercises, particularly for options where drills are not feasible. In this instance, a crisis communication team would be assembled. The goal of the session is to ask "What if?" questions to talk through what would happen if unexpected situations arose before, during and after a crisis.

Testing the plan should happen at least every year, though for some organizations and situations, more frequent testing may be appropriate.

Revising the plan

The plan is a living document. A crisis plan should be reviewed at least once a year; however, the needs of an organization may require more frequent revisions. Actual crises may also inspire revisions.

It is valuable to get a variety of perspectives on the crisis plan, particularly for larger organizations, so getting feedback from leadership, communication and other personnel can help ensure the usability of the document.

When revising a plan, ensuring information, particularly contact information, is key. Adding scenarios that have increased in likelihood may also be necessary during revisions. For example, most organizations did not have a pandemic in their plan, but COVID-19 changed the global landscape. When completed, note the date of revision in the plan.

Final thoughts

Although crises are not entirely avoidable, having a plan can go a long way toward limiting their damage. If nothing else, a plan helps ensure an organization has considered potential crises and employees understand their roles. No plan is perfect, but an imperfect plan is much more effective than a nonexistent one.

References

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Further reading

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