Quick start guide to crisis communications

How to prepare for and overcome a crisis in your nonprofit

Why use this guide?

A serious issue, critical event or crisis can occur at any time. For a nonprofit organization, you could face cuts to long-term funding, internal financial mismanagement, a threat to someone's physical security and safety, board governance issues or any number of other serious situations.

Whatever the event and however remote the possibility may seem, it is critical to be prepared. Effective communications with employees, clients, media, government officials and the public are challenging at the best of times, let alone when your organization's vulnerabilities are exposed and the pressure to act is on.

Managing communications during critical events will help you mitigate and manage risk, limit negative exposure and reputational damage. In some instances, if a crisis is managed well and communications are open, transparent and accountable, an organization can come out ahead of where public perception and their reputation were before the crisis struck.

About Volunteer Alberta

Volunteer Alberta is a provincial member association that serves Alberta's diverse nonprofit organizations including Volunteer Centres for the last 30 years. With our Members and networks, we connect, promote, and strengthen volunteerism and the nonprofit sector in Alberta. We help Alberta do good, together.

What is a crisis?

A crisis is an unexpected event, occurrence or series of events which requires a reactive response. A crisis can create high levels of uncertainty and threaten, or be perceived to threaten, an organization's goals.

Crises are characterized by the elements of:
- Surprise
- Threat
- Short response time

Examples of crises that can hit any organization:
- Privacy breach
- Financial mismanagement (fraud)
- Unethical conduct/behaviour

Is an issue different than a crisis?

An issue is an implied or potential event which can be proactively managed. An issue is an external or internal situation that usually lasts over a medium to long timeframe. Issues are reasonably predictable but can be a serious obstacle to achieving business or policy objectives.

Issues can escalate and become a crisis if not managed and contained. The following are examples of issues or situations that need to be managed with thoughtful communications but are likely not immediately a crisis:
- Departure of a key employee (succession planning)
- A media inquiry that includes difficult questions
- A negative social media inquiry

Are you facing a crisis?

Measuring hazard and outrage

Hazard is a tangible exposure to risk, danger and peril. To the organization, risk or danger can include (but is not limited to) reputational risk, operational risk and financial risk. Examples of hazard include the degree of financial impact, is the situation illegal or considered unethical, and the degree to which the situation will negatively impact the organization's reputation.

Outrage is an extremely strong reaction to a situation, where anger, shock, concern and/or indignation are demonstrated and publicly visible (online and in the media) by many people or enough people of influence. Examples of outrage include a foreign or never seen before situation, a situation that is considered unfair, unjust or criminal, or one that will cause harm.
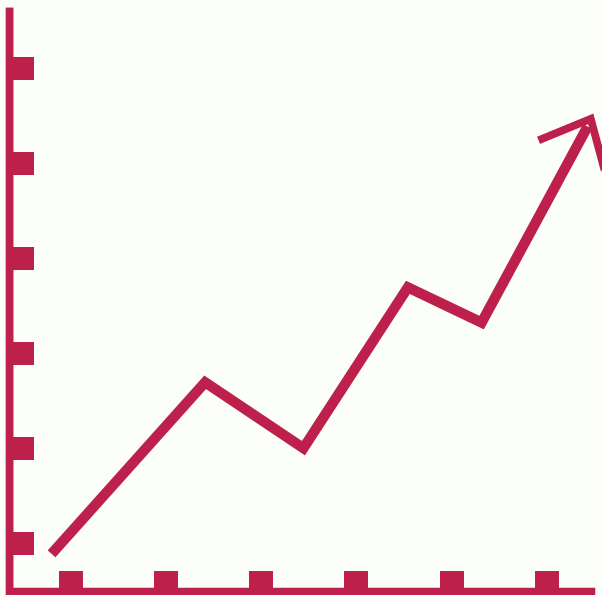
The greater the degree of hazard and outrage, the greater the likelihood the situation is or will be a crisis.

Preparing for a crisis

What is a crisis communications plan?

A crisis communications plan includes processes and guidelines an organization follows when it faces an emergency or unexpected event. A plan includes steps your organization must take to ensure responsive, transparent communications with key stakeholders, along with key messages, media relations advice, contact lists and more.

What to include in your plan

Crisis inventory	A list of crises that are most likely to occur and impact your organization.
Key messages	Develop key messages to communicate for any given crisis.
Stakeholder/media lists	Comprehensive lists of who you'd need to contact during a crisis.
Prepared Q&As	Challenging questions and how your organization would answer them.
Prepared templates	This includes media statements, news releases, social media posts and fact sheets.
Crisis team & plan	Consider the strengths of your team members and list roles/responsibilities.

The 5 stages of crisis management

1 Detection: Monitoring warning signs and notifying staff in the organization of warning signs to prevent an issue becoming a crisis.

2 Prevention/preparation: Active prevention includes transparent and frequent communications to your audiences using communications channels. This includes having a crisis communications plan.

3 Containment: The effort to limit the duration of the crisis or to keep it from spreading to other areas affecting the organization.

4 Recovery: Efforts to return to business as usual which may include restoring the confidence of key publics through effective and timely communication.

5 Learning: The process of evaluating the crisis to determine what was lost and gained, and the organization's performance during the crisis. Learning helps organizations to prevent future crises.

Have you managed the crisis successfully?

Each time your organization finishes managing a crisis, the team involved should evaluate your response to learn and improve future responses.

Here are some questions to help you get started:

Has the reputation of our organization improved or declined based on our crisis response?

Is there anything we would do differently if this crisis was to emerge again?

Could we have improved the media coverage we received? If so, how?

Did we provide our employees/volunteers/stakeholders with enough information so they feel confident in our response?

Did our team perform well under pressure?

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