A 10-Step Crisis Communications Playbook for Employers

Insights

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When a crisis erupts at your organization, you won't have time to develop a response from scratch. Instead, you'll need to have a robust crisis communications plan already in place so you can effectively communicate with your employees, stakeholders, customers, and the general public. Whether you're dealing with protests, strike activity, severe injuries or fatalities, acts of violence, data breaches, allegations of harassment or discrimination, large-scale lawsuits, or any other crisis, this Insight will give you a head start on a playbook you can put into effect to mitigate organizational damage.

Prologue: Agree on Operating Principles

Before you can go to your playbook, it's critical for an organization to agree upon a set of operating principles that will govern the process.

- **Maintain discipline:** Your organization will need to closely follow the agreed-upon crisis management processes or it won't be worth the paper it's printed on. If you have leaders who are prone to shooting from the hip and acting impulsively, you will need to get their buy-in on this process – and an agreement from them to abide by the plan.

- **Commit to truth:** In a similar vein, your organization needs to make a commitment to deal in facts, not assumptions, speculation, or untruths. If you have concerns that leaders or others cannot commit to this principle, you should address that situation before launching any plan.

- **Be flexible:** While your finalized plan may seem perfect in theory, realize that things can change quickly in a crisis. Your team needs to be ready, willing, and able to adapt when they do.

Step 1: Develop Your Core Crisis Team

Your first step is identifying a primary crisis response team – as well as designated back-ups who will be available to assist in the event that key members are unavailable when crisis strikes. You'll want to include members of your Technology, Operations, HR, Communications, Finance, and Legal teams at a minimum.

Step 2: Settle on a Company-Specific Escalation Scale and Framework

You'll want to review a standard escalation framework to help you quickly identify and classify the

type of situation you're dealing with. But you'll also want to adapt it depending on your organization's specific circumstances and perhaps even begin thinking about which types of incidents would fall into which category given your organization's unique history and current standing.

Step 3: Create a Crisis Comms Escalation Worksheet

Your worksheet will help you identify which category a specific situation fits into, and could also help guide you should the winds shift and the problem evolves from one category to the other. You should take into account the unique and specific circumstances related to your organization when developing the spreadsheet such as but not linted to, the financial and reputational impact on your organization.

Step 4: Create Logistical Preparations

Your team should review all of the logistical steps that will be deployed when a crisis develops. This includes items such as having up-to-date email distribution lists, proper facility security protocols, and a healthy crisis management budget.

Step 5: Schedule Proactive Preparation Meetings

You've done the hard work in establishing a preemptive plan for handling any crisis – now make sure you hone that work with regular meetings.

Step 6: Launch Crisis Response

The inevitable has happened and you have a crisis on your hands. What should you do? It depends on what level we're dealing with. Is it a minor issue, a serious problem or a severe circumstance?

Step 7: Develop Contingency Plans

No two crises are the same. That's why flexibility is crucial – and you need to be ready with contingency planning. Consider and prepare for a wide variety of possible outcomes and scenarios. Start game-planning with your team for what you will do if the issue is resolved quickly and favorably. Or if it escalates in severity or scale. What if an important audience receives inaccurate information? Or information leaks to the media or gains unexpected attention? Or secondary issues come to light and derail your pre-developed plans? Being ready to adjust on the fly starts with thinking proactively ahead of time and having some idea of how you'll flex as needed.

Step 8: Stick to Your Messaging Principles

Regardless of how you respond to the crisis as it develops and morphs, make sure you stick to your main messaging principles – which can be summarized by the FACE acronym.

- **Facts**: Limit your communications to facts and demand that all who participate in releasing

information place accuracy above everything else. Quickly correct any misinformation and make sure no one from the organization ever speculates.

- **Accountability**: Even if the situation is not the fault of your organization, demonstrate through both words and actions that you will do what you can to assist. You should also publicly commit to steps you'll take to prevent it from recurring.

- **Consistency**: Commit to uniform messaging throughout a crisis. This will demonstrate to your stakeholders that you are in control of the situation and acting with purpose.

- **Empathy**: Finally, it's important to show you have considered the effect of a crisis on other affected parties. Demonstrating empathy in a public setting will help demonstrate that your organization understands the big picture.

Step 9: Conduct a Post-Crisis Pulse Check

Once the crisis has died down, it's time to take a deep breath – but not time to stop your work. You should engage your team to conduct a post-crisis pulse check.
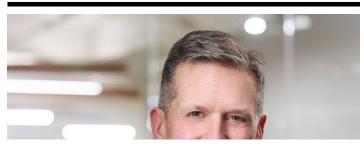
Step 10: Review and Learn

And finally, make sure that you don't lose the opportunity to grow from this process. Survey all crisis team participants and gather feedback about their experiences – what went well, and what they would do differently next time. Then conduct a full-team meeting to discuss all of the findings and prepare a final report on the lessons learned, with recommendations for improvement. You should aim to complete the full post-crisis review process no more than four weeks after the crisis has resolved.

Conclusion

A crisis can occur at any time. If your organization does not have a plan, you can lose control of the narrative quickly. Having a playbook doesn't guarantee a successful response but it will go a long way to reducing the risk that there will be lasting damage to your organization. Be proactive. If you have any questions or would like further information, please consult your Fisher Phillips attorney, the authors of this Insight, or a member of Fisher Phillips' Crisis Communications and Strategy Team. Make sure you are subscribed to Fisher Phillips' Insight System to gather the most up-to-date information about crisis communications issues.

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