PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED

CONTINGENCY COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES FOR D4AD INITIATIVES

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JULY 2020

About This Guide

This guide—developed by Communication**Works**, L.L.C. for the Data for the American Dream (D4AD) project—is designed to provide D4AD and its partners with tools and strategies for developing a contingency communication plan for their initiatives. The goal is to help each initiative be prepared for crises and other unexpected situations that may arise.

About Data for the American Dream (D4AD)

Data for the American Dream (www.d4ad.com) is a consortium bringing together Schmidt Futures, Lumina Foundation, Walmart Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation. D4AD currently funds pilot initiatives in three states (Colorado, Michigan, and New Jersey) that will help provide low-income, lower-skilled, underemployed, and unemployed workers access to current and actionable data, enlisting local case managers from public and private agencies to counsel jobseekers, help them access needed services, and reach the most underserved populations. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) is the implementation partner of D4AD. NCHEMS is a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve strategic decision making in postsecondary education for states, systems, institutions, and workforce development organizations in the United States and abroad.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest mistakes leaders can make is not planning for, or underestimating, a potential crisis or not being prepared for the unexpected. This is particularly true when it comes to protecting private data, monitoring an ever-changing political landscape, and managing perceptions or an organization's effectiveness.

Preparing for the unexpected, in particular for a crisis, might seem nearly impossible. After all, you don't know what is going to happen, when it is going to happen, or who might be involved—that information is all contingent on the situation at hand. But it is neither hard to imagine what some of those situations might involve, nor is it impossible to be prepared for those situations. For example, imagine any one of the following scenarios:

- The databases that drive your workforce development, education and training, or work support services are hacked, and personal information is stolen.

- A data privacy group launches a campaign to protect individual data and launches a campaign that calls on the state to shut down your initiative.

- A provider connected with the initiative is discovered to be skimming funds for inappropriate uses.

- Employers accuse you of misrepresenting the job readiness or skill set of the workers you refer to them.

- A particular group—such as individuals with disabilities—accuses your organization and its partners of not providing equal opportunities.

- Advocates for low-income communities and/or communities of color criticize your organization for not focusing enough on those communities to effect real change.

- Education researchers assert that your program is tracking clients into lower paying, lower-skilled positions rather than providing options to pursue longer-term education and training that could lead to higher paying jobs and careers.

These scenarios may seem unlikely when you are in the planning process. But your organization needs to develop a plan to address these and other circumstances rather than assuming you will have the time and capacity to respond to them when they happen. This is because contingencies are more likely to emerge when a new product or service is being launched or implemented.

This document is designed to help you develop a contingency communications plan before a crisis unfolds. It provides strategic considerations and guidance on how to prepare, respond, and strengthen your organization through any crisis. It provides strategies and tools that can be used at key moments in the lifespan of your initiative to help you:

1. **Take immediate steps at the onset of the initiative** to build your crisis response team early, identify the types of crises you might face, and determine to whom you will need to communicate how you want your organization to be perceived as well as what messages will help you convey those perceptions and solve the problem.

2. **Organize assets, resources, and processes to handle a crisis,** including assessing your communication assets and personnel capacity and ensuring your response team is trained and prepared.

3. **Introduce a strategic response by following clear protocols** that can be used for almost all scenarios.

TEAM BUILDING: IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Nothing can make a response less effective than having different or even conflicting responses coming out from your organization. The first step toward a consistent and coordinated response is to build your team, involving them in the crisis planning process, and in understanding the roles and protocols that are required for developing and implementing the response. This accomplishes several objectives, including:

- Bringing multiple perspectives to the table to think through contingencies you may face and the solutions that are offered up in response to those contingencies.

- Promoting better familiarity with the plan, the goals and approaches your agency will take to respond to a crisis situation.

- Raising the efficiency of responding to whatever challenge arises.

- Raising awareness of what issues need to be monitored, and strategies to prevent small brushfires from turning into forest fires.

When thinking about who should be part of your crisis response team, consider the scenarios that might arise and who would be needed to respond. For example:

- Who will be the spokespeople for the organization?

- Who will be able to explain any technical aspects of the problem (such as in the case of a data breach)?

- Are there any legal questions that we will need answered?

- Who will deal with producing communications for the media and social media?

- Who will be responsible for reaching out to:
  - Clients?
  - Business and industry?
  - Community partners?
  - Policymakers?

While you can't have everyone in your organization on your crisis communication team, the point is to think broadly about whose perspectives will be helpful in planning for and responding to a crisis. Of course, once you start the work of contingency planning, you may determine that others should be added to your team or that you need to expand some members' responsibilities to cover the activities that will need to be accomplished.

SCENARIO BUILDING: PREPARING FOR POTENTIAL CONTINGENCIES

Preparing for contingencies involves much of the same analysis and assessment that goes into any strategic communications planning. You will need to identify your goals, objectives, audiences, messages, allies, and appropriate actions. Below is a scenario-building process that involves thinking broadly about contingencies that may arise and getting basic information in place that will need to be adapted, refined and made more concrete once a situation arises. At the end of the section is a template that can be used to map out potential crisis scenarios.

Identifying Potential Contingency Scenarios

While it may not be possible to imagine every scenario or crisis that might arise, no doubt you have some concerns about what could happen that come to mind. Your list may not be exhaustive—and it will not be possible to imagine the ins and outs of every crisis scenario—but it is helpful to try to imagine multiple challenges from different angles, including contingencies driven by:

- **Data security and privacy issues** can arise in projects that involve multiple agencies and data sets. While your initiative may have sophisticated mechanisms and processes in place to protect data and privacy, daily newspaper headlines about hacking and foul play reveal that the danger of something going wrong is always present.

- **Political issues** related to state local budgets, workforce development, economic development, education, and other issues, including concerns about data sharing and privacy. These could involve actual legislative or policy challenges but also simply be issues that are raised and debated in the political arena without specific proposals.

- **Consumer issues** that could arise from workers, employers, and providers, including, for example, claims of misrepresentation, discrimination, or misuse of services or funds. These issues are particularly challenging because they do not have relatively easy technical solutions but involve careful communications that often deal with people's perceptions and misperceptions.

- **Media (and social media) issues** resulting from negative press and misinformation that sometimes require diplomacy, restraint, and repairing relationships.

It is important to remember that contingency situations can result from actual problems (a data breach, misuse of funds, legislation introduced to defund workforce development, etc.), but are just as likely to be based on misperceptions or conflicting agendas. Each type of challenge poses its own threats, but those dealing with public perception can be more challenging because baseless charges can become widely accepted, undermine the legitimacy of your efforts, and have a lasting negative impact.

D4AD | NCHEMS

Heading the Crisis off at the Pass

While we are ultimately focused on how to respond to a crisis, prevention, as the old adage says, is often the best medicine.

For example, you may know that there is a burgeoning data privacy movement in your state and its advocates are making significant inroads with policymakers. You could avert some of these challenges early in the life of your initiative by:

- Holding meetings with these organizations to identify their concerns, demonstrate the protections in place, and making adjustments to your data systems if needed.

- Briefing policymakers and/or their staff about your initiative, demonstrating your concern for data security and individuals' privacy, and ensuring them that you will continue to communicate with them and work to address any concerns they have.

- Ensuring that your public communication vehicles tackle these issues as part of your overall messaging.

These strategies may not completely prevent a challenging situation from happening, but they will build goodwill and make it much easier to develop a successful crisis response.

Knowing Who Will Need to Hear from You

Understanding your audience is central to any communications planning and it is no different when it comes to contingency communications. But given that your audiences could easily change in a particular crisis, you may need to communicate with specific groups and stakeholders where you may not be well known and may have less influence than in your usual sphere.

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- One of your most powerful tools for preventing a crisis is goodwill among key audiences. The wider and deeper your relations are in the community and at the policy level, the more likely community groups and legislators will not jump into the fray when you are attacked, may help defend your organization from criticism, or will be more open to working with you as you correct a problem. Building strong community, political, and media relationships is work that will benefit the organization on multiple fronts but will also serve as a powerful crisis prevention or mitigation strategy. This might include:

- Setting up meetings with local reporters or editorial boards to inform them of your work.

- Building up your social media presence and connecting with individuals and organizations that may be important in a crisis.

- Briefing community and allied organizations and identifying areas where you can work together.

- Informing key policymakers and staff of your work and how it will benefit their constituents, your region and the state.

For example, jobseekers are a primary audience and will need to be assured that their personal information will be protected. You will need to reach out to them if their data is compromised but also to privacy advocates who previously were not a primary audience. For that reason, crisis communications experts advise that you break down potential audiences into three separate groups—those directly impacted, those indirectly impacted, and the broader community.

For example, if you encountered the situation where a major employer in your area made a public statement that your program was failing to provide the necessary training and support to prepare job candidates properly, you would have several stakeholders to consider.

Directly Impacted	• The employer making the claim • Current employees you worked with now at that business • Current clients hoping to work for that employer
Indirectly Impacted	• Other employers you work with • Your other clients • Your staff responsible for training and support
Broader Community	• The business community • Policymakers with oversight or budgetary authority over workforce development programs • Other providers

The primary audiences are those directly affected by the crisis. If you do not address their concerns and solve the problem, their criticisms are likely to spill over to other audiences. At all times, even when communicating with the target audience, be aware of how your messages and communications vehicles and tactics will be heard by the wider audience.

In addition, your primary communication goals may change in a crisis. For instance, in normal times, your biggest challenge with clients may be simply about engagement—persuading them that using your tools and resources and following your process are worth the time and the eventual outcome. However, if you have a data breach, you are going to first have to focus on rebuilding trust in your work and perceptions of your organization (your brand) before you can even begin the engagement effort.

Managing Perceptions

A fundamental goal of crisis communications is managing how others perceive your organization in general and your initiative in particular. Failure to convey the right image and tone in responding to criticism or an operational breakdown can increase the likelihood that audiences will have negative perceptions of your brand. As you review the potential scenarios, think about what image you want to convey and how you hope those outside your organization will perceive or describe your response. Some common perception goals are to get people see you as:

Trustworthy	Accountable	Knowledgeable
Honest	Caring	Committed
Transparent	Effective	Responsive

No doubt you will have other ways you want your organization to be seen, but the important thing is that your response to a crisis needs to walk the talk to demonstrate how you want others to perceive you. How you go about responding to crisis and other contingency situations is as important as correcting the problem and, in fact, can lead to strengthening your brand if you handle the problem in the right way. For example, if you discover that you have a partner who provides services that has been misusing funds, you will not only need to address the financial and legal problems, you will also need to ensure that an isolated problem doesn't taint the whole organization and initiative, but rather turns into an opportunity. We have seen how acting immediately and responsibly to solve difficult problems, and reaching out to key stakeholders with the right messages at the right time can actually build future trust in the enterprise.

Conveying the Right Message

A common mistake leaders make in a crisis is to get overly focused on fixing technical details and losing sight of the larger messages that can assure their audiences that the organization is concerned, strategic, responsible, and trustworthy. To that end, it can be helpful to think of messaging at two levels:

- **Key messages**—your main overall message that responds to the situation but also reveals key attributes of your organization that reflect your values, convey your mission and purpose, and show that you are concerned, responsible, and working in the best interests of those you serve. Remember that a crisis situation may be the first time a particular audience hears about and from you, so you need to convey what the organization and initiative stand for.

- **Strategic responses**—more targeted responses that address particular aspects of the crisis that are of crucial importance to certain audiences, as not all audiences will need the same information. These will be consistent with your overall key messages, but may be segmented by audience, by the communication vehicle, by timing, or all three.

D4AD MESSAGING RESOURCES

Need help developing your overall messaging platform and strategy? Check out D4AD's Core Messaging documents and the D4AD Communication Launch Guide.

Say you have a data breach, for example, in which a significant amount of private information was exposed, but which did not result in leaking the most sensitive information such as Social Security Numbers.

Your key messages might focus on:

• your clients as your top priority with a description of them to show who you serve;

• the parameters of what information was exposed and not exposed;

• the ways in which your data security measures go beyond what is required;

• how you are using this as an opportunity to further strengthen these measures; and,

• highlighting the benefits, value, and power of your digital tools.

While your strategic responses will be different based on who is affected and how, you will likely need to do the following:

• Immediately reach out to clients whose information was exposed, providing them a timely response of exactly what happened and what information was stolen and what was not.

• Reassure those whose information was not exposed that their information is still secure.

• Prepare core messages, statements, and talking points based on those messages. Messages with more details will need to be developed for media and other outside organizations.

• Revise outreach materials to stress data security going forward as the incident may cause ongoing questions.

The goal here is to have messaging that is responsive, connects with your organization's big-picture goals and messaging, and promotes positive perceptions of the organization.

PLANNING TOOL: MAPPING OUT POTENTIAL CRISIS SCENARIOS

The following table is tool that can be used to map out potential crisis scenarios. The intent here is to identify scenarios you feel warrant being prepared for and sketching out basic information about how you will approach those scenarios based on the strategic considerations outlined in the previous section.

Crisis Scenario Planning Template		
Scenario One Describe a crisis scenario you imagine you could face.		
Possible Solutions List possible solutions to the problem (these may or may not be communications solutions depending on the scenario).		
Audiences/Stakeholders		
Directly Impacted	Indirectly impacted	Broader Community
Perceptions For each audience category, list how you want them to perceive your organization during and after the crisis. These may be the same for multiple audiences, but it is worth considering each separately.		
Key Messages Identify the key messages you want to convey overall and that will serve as a frame for your strategic responses (try to limit your key messages to no more than five).		
Strategic Responses Identify the strategic responses you will create for each of your audiences identified above.		

RESOURCE AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT

Every organization has a different capacity to be able to respond to a crisis, although organizations typically lack two key resources—personnel and time. One obvious solution is to hire more people or bring in outside experts to help with your crisis response, but that may not be a viable solution due to budget constraints. Taking stock of your communications capacity and training the staff to be involved will allow you to share the work and make your organization more efficient and effective in responding to crises, and in communications overall.

Taking Stock of Your Communications Assets

Now that you have identified potential crisis scenarios, you have a better sense of what types of communications will be necessary. Most crisis scenarios will require communication approaches and vehicles beyond those of your normal communication operations. Below is a list of possible communication activities that are typically required in a crisis situation, some of which might serve multiple functions.

For Workers and Jobseekers

The clients you serve are your most important concern and, in almost any crisis scenario we can think of, will require some form of outreach. Possible vehicles and outreach activities for them might include:

- Direct correspondence (letter, email, text as appropriate)
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) to be posted on the website
- Phone calls or a dedicated "hotline"
- Additional staff capacity for in-person visits
- Coordination with partner/referring organizations.

For the Media

Almost all crisis situations involve being prepared for media engagement. Even if, in the end the media does not cover the event, you will most likely need to be prepared for inquiries and, in some cases, you will want to get out ahead of the story and engage the media to ensure your story is told. Likely communications vehicles and activities include:

- Organizational statement to post on your website
- News release
- Talking points for spokespeople
- Op-ed/Letter to the editor responding to the situation
- Media monitoring and handling press inquiries
- Coordination with other organizations involved in responding to media.

For Social Media

Social media is perhaps the most unpredictable communications challenge you will have in a crisis situation as it is the least controllable and potentially the most time consuming. Social media activities might include:

• Developing original social media content that responds to the situation

• Monitoring social media posts about your organization and the situation

• Responding as appropriate to questions, concerns and criticism via social media.

If you do not have a social media presence, a crisis can force you on to social media, at which point the communications challenge will be even greater as you try to build your presence in the midst of a crisis. Whether you are prepared or not, social media use can be vexing in crisis communications, and we emphasize these issues in a table of do's and don'ts on page 17.

For Partner or Allied Organizations

In some scenarios your partners may be directly or indirectly affected by the crisis; in others, they may simply know your organization is facing a challenge that will not have an impact on them. In either situation, communications activities can ensure that you maintain your valuable relationship and share key messages about a crisis with them and their audiences. Possible vehicles and activities will include:

• Letters to organizational leaders

• Phone calls to key partners

• FAQs for partners, to be sent directly or posted on website

• Helping develop messages for their audiences

• Media and crisis response coordination with those organizations that have been directly affected by the crisis.

For Policymakers

Whether or not policymakers are directly affected by the situation, be prepared to respond to policymakers. One call from a constituent or one story in a local media outlet might engage them in the issue and you should be prepared. Communications vehicles and activities might include:

• Responses to inquiries from a legislative or administrative office

• Letters to policymakers

• Talking points and logistics for legislative briefings

• Monitoring legislative action and attitudes

• Op-eds/letters to the editor in response to legislative situation

• Coordination with other organizations impacted by legislative action.

For Internal Communication

Internal communications often get overlooked in a crisis as organizations are so concerned with what is happening externally. However, failure to communicate internally can cause more problems externally. Remember that members of your organization will be interacting with others on social media,

receiving phone and email inquiries, getting questions from friends and family and so on. Ensuring everyone is on the same page, or at least in the same chapter, is worth your time. This may include:

- Internal FAQs

- Staff briefings

- Trainings on client communications

- Guidance on media inquiries and use of social media in a crisis

- Scripts for inbound and/or outbound calls and emails.

Assessing and Preparing Personnel Resources

You have already begun this process by building your team, but now that you have outlined potential scenarios and the communication vehicles and activities you need to respond, you can use these to assess and prepare your personnel resources.

A Timely Response

Remember that while your communications staff may be able to handle regular communications in the normal course of business, crises often require you to find an extra gear to develop messages rapidly produce materials, reach out to allies, and implement a coordinated response. There will be no lead time and you will not have the luxury to plan and prepare.

One way to assess how quickly you need to respond is to examine one or two crisis scenarios and the key messages and strategic responses you outline for the scenario. Then identify all communication activities and vehicles that would need to be produced and executed, and measure what you could accomplish in a short period of time, say, by the end of the first day or 48 to 72 hours. Completing the simple chart below is a quick way to see if you are overly reliant on an individual or set of individuals on your team, and to help you identify tasks that might be assigned differently to more evenly distribute the work.

Crisis Scenario Planning Template		
Scenario Brief description of the scenario to be used.		
Communication Activities/Vehicles Based on the key messages and strategic responses for this scenario, list each communication activity, the staff person responsible, and the amount of time the activity would take (hours, days, ongoing, etc.)		
Activity/Vehicle	**Staff Responsible**	**Time to Complete**
Staff Member List all staff members assigned responsibilities above and total hours of tasks assigned.		**Total Hours Assigned**

The key here is to fill this out honestly to assess where you are and also to look at the time this work could take in the short term, keeping in mind that most organizations cannot put all other work on hold even in a time of crisis.

A Trained Response

Communicating effectively can be a challenge even in the best of circumstances, but communicating in a crisis when your audience may be concerned, upset, frustrated, or even angry, requires patience, skill, and practice. Developing the possible scenarios and assessing what would need to be done is a valuable exercise in and of itself, but those scenarios can also be used for further training to help your team practice and hone their skills in responding to a crisis situation.

Roleplaying Your Responses

One of the most effective exercises to help your spokespeople prepare is roleplaying situations based on a scenario. Circumstances might include potential interviews with the media, calls from upset clients, a call from the governor's chief of staff or a leader of a partner organization. In any of these cases, spokespeople need to be briefed on the context, who they are talking to, what their concerns are, and other matters, and then be given at least a few minutes to prepare. You may even have a team of people help prepare the spokesperson and then have a communications staff member take on the role of interviewer.

Posting Your Responses

A simple exercise to help your team think about social media is to create ten sample postings from various stakeholders related to a particular scenario. Have your teamwork in pairs to assess whether or not your organization should respond to each post, why or why not and if you are going to respond, what should you say. Comparing answers will help you hone your social media strategy and your strategic responses.

Learning from Other's Responses

Early on, perhaps even before you have put your plan together, a useful exercise is to look as a team at case studies of other crisis communication situations. There are endless examples on the internet, including Target's and Anthem's data breaches, the Volkswagen emissions scandal, Southwest Airline's system outage, and even more localized events such as the Arizona Highways magazine misidentifying a poisonous mushroom as edible. Even if these case studies seem focused on issues you will not face or are larger in scale than your organization would need to handle, they still offer valuable insights about what works, what doesn't work, and what the short- and long-term consequences of various strategies might be.

The point here is that virtually any aspect of a scenario that makes you ask "well, how would we respond to that?" is an opportunity to practice and be even more prepared. And one final note. Training is often seen as an obligation that gets in the way of other work, and being put on the spot even in a roleplaying exercise can be stressful. Try to keep these exercises as fun and engaging as possible and focused on team building and skills development.

RESPONDING STRATEGICALLY TO CRISES AND OTHER CONTINGENCIES

In previous sections, we have largely focused on being prepared for a crisis or contingency situation, but executing the plan effectively is equally important. While you can't plan every response ahead of time, you can establish certain guidelines to ensure your response is strategic. The following section outlines some of the strategies that can guide your response. The final section includes a sample set of protocols that can be used to establish your own crisis response process.

Fast is Good, But Smart is Better

One of the most common reactions to a crisis from a communications standpoint is to attempt to respond immediately, to nip the problem in the bud. Being responsive is definitely a goal in crisis communications because you need to ensure that those people affected by the crisis have information to protect themselves from further harm and because a slow response can make an organization seem self-protective and uncaring about others. However, responding too quickly before you know all of the facts can lead to inaccurate or knee-jerk responses that can potentially cause more harm than good. This is particularly true with social media. That is why, as soon as a potential contingency arises, you should assemble your team prior to responding to do appropriate triage, determining what the facts are and identifying priorities, so that you will implement smart and appropriate aspects of your plan.

Assess the Risks

Beyond fact finding to accurately understand the situation (what has happened, who is affected, and the elements of the problem to prioritize in response), you need to use the information gathered to assess the risk to your organization and those you serve. This includes assessing the risk involved in the situation. If the risk is high—a crisis that could undermine the initiative and damage your organization's reputation—you will need to initiate a comprehensive response that speaks to all audiences from those directly impacted to the broader community. If however, the risk is low—the impact of the situation is limited, or the problem is peripheral to your sphere of influence and operations, or the source of the problem is not credible, has an obvious private agenda and/or lacks the clout to pursue it—a different response may be warranted. The point is, you need to gauge the magnitude of your response to the actual threat and avoid turning a minor crisis into a major one.

Honesty IS the Best Policy

Crisis communications require that your organization be as honest, accurate and transparent as possible. Whatever the crisis, you should openly own whatever part of the crisis is your responsibility and never blame other parties or suggest you are not accountable. Be responsive to inquiries for information and try to avoid answers that send a message that you are hedging or hiding information. If you cannot respond immediately, do not ignore the request. Acknowledge the inquiry and convey that you need to get more information to be able to respond accurately, and then ensure that you get back to the person or organization making the inquiry.

Don't Let Others Tell the Whole Story

Being responsive is particularly important with the media. If you avoid them or offer "no comment," you will have no say in the matter and let others tell the story for you. If that story is then inaccurate or negative, you will be in a more difficult and reactive position than had you been responsive in the first place. This is why building relationships with the media prior to a crisis is crucial.

Respond to Perceptions and the Problem

As noted previously, dealing with perceptions can be as important as dealing with an actual problem. Say, for instance, your initiative and organization are accused of ignoring low-income jobseekers of color. You will need to address what you are (and are not) doing for those communities, what you can change, and also how people perceive your services to those communities. Determine frankly how you are or are not "just another part of the problem," and where you need to go from there to address those concerns.

Limit Your Messengers

While you may have a team prepared to respond and have allies who have special connections to key audiences as well as may need to use different team members with some audiences, try to limit the number of spokespeople or messengers. First, this will help keep your message consistent. Second, if your staff knows that there are clearly identified spokespeople it sends a clear message that they should not be handling outside inquiries without first communicating with the team. This also applies to social media where it should be clear who is monitoring and responding on behalf of the organization.

Don't Go It Alone

Having partners and allies who can backstop your messages and provide third-party validation for your initiative, your organization, and your response, is incredibly useful. They should have the credibility of a neutral observer who is a fair arbiter of what is happening and not simply protecting their own organization.

Last, but Not Least: Social Media

We have suggested throughout this document that social media is a particular concern in crisis communications and can, in fact, be the source of, or significantly exacerbate, a crisis. At the same time, strategic use of social media can also be a valuable tool. Below are a set of do's and don't for social media included in the D4AD Campaign Launch Guide that also serve as good guidance for approaching social media in crisis communications.

Dos	Don'ts
• Consider the source—posts from individuals who have little influence do not warrant responses.	• Overreact in quick responses to posts which can result in online debating.
• Remember that posts or responses to other posts are for your wider audience as much as they are aimed at a particular group or individual.	• Engage "trolls" or individuals who are merely attempting to create controversy or online arguments.
• Be thoughtful and honest—never be knee-jerk in social media posts and always take questions and concerns seriously.	• Engage in ad hominin attacks—always maintain a civil and concerned tone.
• Correct false information, but just stick to the facts.	• Over share. Too many responses to criticisms or online attacks will simply elevate the issue.
• Be transparent—don't try to obfuscate an issue (if you cannot respond for legal or privacy reasons, say so).	• Treat all social media platforms the same. Match the content of your post to the platform.
• Always try to show the benefits of your initiative—often when a controversy arises, it is helpful to post information about the benefits rather than just responding to opposing views.	• Don't transfer a controversy from one platform to another. If a scenario is being debated on Twitter, don't cross-post to Facebook and start the conversation there unless it is to the benefit of the organization.
• Promote posts and comments from supporters.	• Delete comments or posts because they are negative—show a willingness to allow for opposing viewpoints.
• Seek third-party validators who can respond to criticisms on your behalf and promote the benefits of your initiative.	• Rely on individuals within the organization to respond to crisis scenarios rather than having a consistent organizational message.

ESTABLISHING PROTOCOLS FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Having a documented and agreed upon set of crisis communication protocols—a process for how you will proceed in a crisis situation—is important to ensuring a coordinated and informed response. The following sequence is an example of what your organization's crisis communications protocols might look like. These can be adapted to fit your particular organization or agency, and obviously assignments for completing tasks at each stage will need to be made. Spending time reviewing your protocols with your team ahead of a crisis, and ultimately with the entire staff, is useful to ensure everyone is aware of the sequence of events you will follow in responding to a crisis from a communications standpoint.

Organizational Crisis Communication Process

1. Notify team leader of potential contingency or crisis situation. When a situation occurs that is considered a potential crisis (regardless of where that originates—media, a client, another organization, etc.), our crisis communications response team leader should be notified before any response is initiated. Team leaders will need to do a quick assessment about the nature of the situation—many of which will be dealt with in greater detail by the team if the situation warrants it.

KEY QUESTIONS:

a. Is this an isolated event?

b. Does this have the potential to grow into a larger problem? How quickly?

c. Is the source credible?

d. Are there likely to be additional reports or inquiries?

e. Does this warrant bringing together the full team and implementing the crisis communications plan?

2. Brief internal communications. If required, the team will send a brief update to staff to ensure that they are aware of the situation and that any additional inquiries should be forwarded to the team and that no one should respond until they receive guidance from the team.

KEY QUESTIONS:

a. Are other staff likely to hear about the situation from other external sources?

b. Do we need an immediate message to staff or do we have time to gather more information?

c. What is the best vehicle for communications given the sensitivity of the situation?

d. Do we need to bring additional staff with particular expertise onto the response team given the situation?

Organizational Crisis Communication Process

3. Gather facts and assess risk. The team will gather all facts about the situation including seriousness of the crisis, people impacted, organizations involved, and the potential impact on perceptions of the organization, and assess the potential risks to the organization. Key questions at this stage will change depending on the situation, but do not overlook the first question below. Often you will find that your team might not all have the same answer to this question and it is important to ask, answer, and agree upon an answer before moving on.

KEY QUESTIONS:

a. What is the challenge/problem/crisis?

b. What additional information do we need to fully understand the issue?

c. Is there a technical solution or a factual answer, or is this a perception problem?

d. Is this an isolated incident or has it the potential to grow?

e. How many people, groups and/or organizations are impacted? How?

f. Are we able to correct the problem or address the issue for each of those impacted or do we need more information about possible solutions?

g. Are there any legal issues involved?

h. Who outside of the organizations knows or soon will know?

    i. If the situation involves an accusation from an external source, is that source credible?

j. Who will the external source likely communicate with?

k. What is the overall risk to the organization if we:

    i. Do not respond?

    ii. Respond in a very limited way?

    iii. Implement a comprehensive response covering everyone potentially impacted?

Organizational Crisis Communication Process

4. Response decision. After fact finding and risk assessment, the team will determine what our response will be, including key messages and strategic responses.

KEY QUESTIONS:

a. How do we want the organization to be perceived throughout and after this crisis is over?

b. What are our key messages that reflect those outcomes?

c. What strategic responses to we need to make for:

    i. Those directly affected?

    ii. Those indirectly affected?

    iii. The broader community?

d. What communication vehicles should be used for each audience?

e. Are there particular individuals or organizations that require special attention?

f. What is our media strategy?

g. What is our social media strategy?

h. Are there partner organizations we need to engage to help with our response?

5. Establish a calendar and responsibilities. The team will establish a timeline/calendar for responding and assign responsibilities to team members and other staff.

KEY QUESTIONS:

a. What is the order of responses that need to be developed?

b. When do responses need to go out?

c. Who is responsible for each task?

d. How will we monitor progress and stay on schedule?

6. Post-crisis assessment. Once a crisis is over, the team will assess our response to determine how effective it was and what adjustments need to be made to our contingency communications plan and protocols.

a. Overall, would we describe our response as effective? Why or why not?

b. How well did we address the needs of each audience impacted?

c. How effective were our communication vehicles?

    i. Spokespeople?

    ii. Written materials?

    iii. Media materials/interactions?

    iv. Social media?

d. What ongoing activity do we need to do to ensure this scenario does not occur again?

e. What changes do we need to make to our plan and/or protocols?

CONCLUSION

Planning for the unexpected may seem like a significant amount of work that is beyond your current capacity and too far off to be a priority. But with the right planning and teamwork, it can be quite manageable and adequately prepare you to turn a crisis into an opportunity. Done well, you can build greater support and understanding for your cause and strengthen your brand.

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