The Six Stages of a Crisis
Stage Four: Management

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COMMUNICATION DURING A CRISIS

Executive Summary

During the management phase of a crisis, responding organizations must develop and share critical information with a variety of audiences, including those directly affected by the incident. Messages crafted during this phase must account for rapidly changing conditions and the emotional, physical, and cognitive state of the message recipients. In addition, there should be an emphasis on providing operational information through various media outlets to effectively communicate messages to impacted individuals.

The Facts in Brief

A crisis is an unforeseen occurrence that disrupts normal operations and has the potential to cause significant financial, security, safety, and reputational harm. In a crisis, the safety and well-being of employees or the public may be endangered. If this critical situation escalates, additional complex threats and risks could develop. Every stage of a crisis dictates the audience's requirements, which, at a minimum, are the need for information and the response of the organization providing the warning.

There are six recognized phases within every crisis: (1) Warning; (2) Risk Assessment; (3) Response; (4) Management; (5) Resolution; and (6) Recovery. This is the fourth of six topic briefings that will explore each phase of a crisis, identify specific areas of concern, and provide manageable solutions.

The fourth phase of a crisis is the management phase. In this phase, organizations must gauge their responses according to the progression of a crisis – it will either move toward resolution or get worse as new layers of complexity emerge.

During the management phase, communication should focus on providing critical information to impacted stakeholders, employees, and the community. Infusion of meta-messages into a critical communication strategy also provides valuable context throughout the lifecycle of a rapidly changing event.

Meta-messages are non-verbal or supplemental cues that help message recipients determine how to interpret and respond to a notification. Message recipients may ask numerous questions, such as: Is the message urgent? Should I act now or later?

Maintaining awareness of the physical, emotional, and cognitive challenges endured by those affected during a crisis is key. Situations change cognitive processing capabilities, such as thinking, reasoning, remembering, imagining, and learning, and understanding cognitive challenges helps when crafting messages for specific audiences.

There is an inverse relationship between cognitive abilities and stress levels – cognitive abilities typically decrease as stress levels increase. People possess different cognitive abilities and limitations, which, in turn, affect decision-making capabilities in a crisis.

Because of this reduced cognitive function, messages formulated during the management phase should focus on operational or pragmatic information. These messages should contain clear, specific instructions that take into account that circumstances, and the people responding to them, could change.

Communication during a crisis should focus on individuals first, show genuine care and compassion for those involved, bolster or reinforce crisis response efforts, and emphasize mitigation strategies. Provide messages that demonstrate responsibility and maintain integrity (doing the right thing at the right time).

Messages should not cast blame or give a negative focus or outlook. This can cause significant reputational harm from which it will be difficult to recover.

Two-way communication strategies allow situational evaluation from multiple viewpoints and increased effectiveness of crisis mitigation efforts. Obtain as much factual information as possible and maintain situational awareness throughout the management phase through interactive communication with expert or on-the-scene audiences.

Social media networks can help your organization both provide and obtain information. In the management phase, social media messages should mirror those communicated through traditional or new media channels. Maintaining multiple communication channels can be time-consuming, so allocate resources such as time and personnel accordingly.

Key Recommendations

1. **Make strategic use of meta-messages:** What you say, how you say it, when you say it, the context, and the mental and physical status of the audience will impact the communication process and meaning/interpretation/behavioral response of target audiences. Craft your messages carefully and ensure notifications are validated for specific contexts and audiences.

2. **Incorporate two-way communication strategies:** Use two-way communication to leverage community content and qualify critical information. Your people can provide on-the-scene updates during a crisis, and two-way communication strategies ensure you get feedback from message recipients and incorporate it into your crisis response plan.

3. **Utilize social media:** Use insight from social media to bolster your critical communication strategy. Twitter, weather feeds, and various social networks can be used to extract relevant, real-time data that is important to your organization and helps you provide a more efficient and targeted response to a crisis.

About Robert C. Chandler, Ph.D.

Dr. Robert C. Chandler, (Ph.D., University of Kansas; M.A., Wake Forest University; B.A., Harding College) is Professor of Communication and Director of the Nicholson School of Communication (NSC) at the University of Central Florida (UCF).

Dr. Chandler's research spans the range of crisis communication, leadership, teamwork, decision making, psychometric variables during crises, and emergency communication, including specific areas of crisis and incident notification, warning messages, cognitive processing, and message comprehension. He also investigates organizational communication, communication and conflict, risk communication, multicultural and intercultural communication issues, and business ethics. He is the creator of several widely-used planning models for crisis and emergency communication preparedness, including: (1) Communication Planning for the Six Stages of Crisis, (2) the 3-3-30© principle for incident notification, and (3) Message Mapping: The Chandler Model.

Dr. Chandler is an internationally recognized social scientific researcher with more than 150 academic and professional papers, including widely-circulated "white papers" on emergency and crisis communication. He has authored more than 75 academic and professional publications, and is the author or co-author of eight books including: Emergency Notification (2010); Surviving the Pandemic: A Communication Management Guide for Business (2009); Media Relations (2008); Disaster Recovery and the News Media (2007); Managing the Risks for Corporate Integrity: How to Survive an Ethical Misconduct Disaster (2006); Pandemic: Business Continuity Planning Priorities for the Coming Outbreak (2005); and Crisis and Emergency Communication (2006).

About Everbridge

Everbridge provides industry-leading interactive communication and mass notification solutions to organizations in all major industries and government sectors.

Communication failures have historically plagued organizations in their ability to respond to and minimize the human, operational, and financial impact of critical events and emergency incidents. Everbridge began with a shared vision: empowering a single person to communicate with any number of people as easily as communicating with one person to save lives, protect assets, minimize loss, and ensure continuity of operations. Everbridge brings technology and expertise together at every level for a complete solution. Everbridge solutions match your unique needs, from safety and survival during a crisis to cutting costs and achieving efficiencies in your everyday operations. Our understanding of mass notification and interactive communication challenges is leveraged in everything we do, from how we build our technology from the ground up to the expertise of the people we hire and best practices we share with the community.

We design the Everbridge system according to several key tenets:

- **Target the individual** – not the device. Everbridge has the most comprehensive notification system available, offering more than 30 contact paths that can be designated by incident type or by escalation steps.

- **Ease-of-use during any situation** – emergency or daily use – so even a non-technical person can communicate effortlessly and without anxiety.

- **Speed and reliability of communications.** Every second counts in an emergency. With global datacenters and an infrastructure unparalleled in security and reliability, the Everbridge mass notification system is designed for rapid and efficient communications worldwide so your message will always go through.

- **Universal accessibility** – with a fully managed system requiring no hardware, no software, no maintenance, and a flexible pay-as-you-grow model, organizations large and small have access to the same powerful communication capabilities.

- **Scalability** – the Everbridge mass notification system provides the ultimate flexibility in communication capabilities to meet changing needs in today's dynamic environment. The Everbridge system is inherently scalable to grow with and adjust to the requirements of any organization quickly and without disruption to internal processes, infrastructure, or resources.

Visit www.everbridge.com to learn more.