



UNIT-4

PR and Crisis Management

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand what is the relationship between PR and Crisis Management.

Unit 4

PR and Crisis Management

Business Continuity and Recovery

Crisis communications have a different intensity than much of our other work, but the essence is the same in that you must communicate effectively, consistently, and in a timely manner. In the case of an emergency, if an emergency operation center needs to be set up, the most senior member of the team remains in charge until the team leader reports in. If you aren't the team leader, and not the communications leader, you absolutely should not be making statements to the media. Let the communications leader, who has been trained in what to say (and not to say) look after that function when they arrive.

It can be very practical to have colored vests for each member of the team, so that other members and employees at large know who is in charge. You can use vests that match your operation in some way, or coordinate with what your local emergency services use. Just make sure that people are visible. Think about blue for spokesperson, orange for first aid, yellow for transportation, green for the person in charge, etc.

Work with, not against, emergency services personnel who may also be responding to the incident. Regardless of the circumstances, you need to make sure they can complete rescue and recovery, transport injured people, and conduct investigations as needed. You also need to keep yourself informed about what is going on, what is being said in the media (if you can), and prepare to communicate frequently.

The chain of command for your crisis management team (the order of who is in charge) is a necessary part of your crisis management plan. It needs to be communicated to, and understood by, everyone in a communications role.

Setting Priorities

When you have determined what urgent and non-urgent aspects of the business need to be restored to maintain the integrity of the business and meet stakeholder expectations, you will know what needs to be done first. Often, we will review each major function of the business to determine what activities are essential, and how much time we can tolerate for any function to be unavailable. For example, a hospital may be unable to tolerate any time at all for an emergency department to be closed. The tolerance for that part of the business to be unavailable is zero. Within the same hospital, though, they may be able to tolerate the kitchen being unavailable for up to three hours and still meet the needs of their patients. However, if the kitchen is destroyed, there could be an expectation that food could be secured from another location (i.e. another hospital across town) within the three-hour window.

Another example would be that a fast-food restaurant could close for a 24-hour period with virtually no effect on customers, who could go somewhere else. (Shareholders might find it unsatisfactory, however.

If the local state building becomes inaccessible, the fact that renewals for drivers' licenses cannot be processed is not as big of a problem as the inability to issue checks for welfare or social services benefits.

Essential Crisis Plan Elements

Every organization will have different answers to the question, "what is critical for us?" but what's important is to have the conversation and decide what is important together.

The following list will help to create a solid crisis plan for your organization. As PR managers or consultants, you can help to create documents that people will engage with.

The Book

Accessibility

There needs to be a copy of the plan available for reference at all times, and it needs to be available to everyone, and it needs to be up to date. It's not enough to have the plan stored on a computer server either: if the power is out and servers unavailable, the plan is not going to be enacted.

Keep a list of updates in the front of each copy so people reading it know they are looking at the most recent version.

Make the book (or binder, as is often the case) a noticeable color, so that people can put their hands on it quickly. A nice bright orange or yellow should stand out from a desk or shelf full of black, white, and blue reference materials.

Indexing

This book must be easy to read and to use. Have a table of contents at the front, and an index in the back. Tabs will also assist in quickly locating information.

Preamble

This section will be helpful for members of the crisis management team and anyone who has to fill in on short notice. Introductions, purpose of the plan, statements of scope, policies, and anything else deemed helpful should be included here.

Details

This should be a living part of the document, where members of the team can keep notes of incidents as they unfold, track what takes place, decisions made, meeting minutes and notes, reasons for not implementing policy or decisions exactly as designed, and so on.

Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

The details of the EOC all need to be here in the book. The address, members of the team expected to report there, available infrastructure and equipment, how to get access to the building, what items of support the team needs to bring (computers, phones, water, food, radios, chairs, extension cords, generators, first aid kits, etc.).

Members of the Crisis Management Team

The Basics

Keep this up to date. These are the people who will coordinate activities during the crisis, and look after all issues of continuity and recovery. Your spokesperson should also be a part of this group. This section should include all contact details for the entire team (phone numbers, e-mail including an alternate in case work e-mail is unavailable, social media, home address). Depending on the size of your company, you may have a core (leadership) team at the EOC, and other members assigned elsewhere.

Job Descriptions

Include all roles and responsibilities that will be required in response to a crisis. Make sure that these descriptions are also understandable for anyone who has to step into a role unexpectedly. For example, if your spokesperson or CEO is injured or indisposed, someone is going to have to be reassigned or promoted into their role.

Supplemental Teams

If you have multiple locations, you will need to have teams in place for each. These can report back to a central team at headquarters or act independently depending on the circumstances. It may be a bit of a challenge to maintain the contact information for these teams; make it a priority so that it gets done.

Alternate Team Members

Having alternates who are prepared, trained, and capable is essential. According to author Alan Bernstein, this is where a crisis plan can overcome a breakdown when someone becomes unavailable or cannot be contacted. You should have an alternate identified for each member of the crisis team.

Procedures for Each Scenario

This is essential. Don't leave your people trying to decide what to do in the midst of a crisis. Use the information and feedback from previous incidents, drills, and the results of your crisis audits, to develop procedures for whatever threats are present. One tabbed section for each scenario (like fire, flood, power outage, severe storm, flood, bomb threat, and other external or internal threats), including procedures and sample statements to issue to the media, is appropriate.

Spokespeople

Each team needs to have one person who is appointed to speak for the organization during a crisis. This may be the CEO, and in some circumstances, or at a certain intensity of crisis, should be. However, some CEOs are not strong speakers, or are perhaps unavailable, so there needs to be other people who are trained and ready to deal with the media, to communicate with employees and perhaps their families, and members of the community directly.

Stakeholders

This section has to define the stakeholders that are important so that you remember to communicate with the people who are essential to your business. Stakeholders can be employees, customers, contractors, suppliers, and anyone who visits the premises. Whether you are a privately-held or a publicly traded company, there can also be investors and shareholders, government regulatory agencies, insurance companies, and more. Each of these people and organizations also need to be identified in your communication plan. Make sure that all of their contact details are kept up to date at least every 90 days.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

This section may include the provision of counseling services for people who are affected by the incident. You may have heard about something like this following a serious incident at a school or workplace, where the organization provides counseling for the people involved, immediately following an incident.

Event Debriefing

The last section of the plan should have room for a summary where each member of the crisis management team will make notes that are necessary to share after the incident has resolved, or at least the emergency aspects have been dealt with. This should include comments that demonstrate strengths and weaknesses of the plan, and recommendations for improvement. This is an important part of the plan, as you use lessons learned in order to prepare for the next time to the best of your ability.

Test Your Knowledge

Exercising Options Scenario

Your company has a big presence in your industry and the community. The plant is located in an industrial area on the edge of a high density residential neighborhood. Last night, a nearby water main froze, burst, and water flooded into the building for several hours before it was shut off. The water also leaked into the power station located next to your property, creating a massive short circuit and subsequent power shutdown. There is no power, heat, or telephone access in the building. The outside temperature is a steady 20 degrees below freezing, which is highly unusual in your area.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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Social Media and Public Relations

Social media is a firmly established element of the media, and it's going to continue to evolve and wrap its way throughout our lives in intangible ways. Every press release, public appearance, annual report, as well as aspects of information that used to be kept protected, are now found within social media.

Test Your Knowledge

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What about news services and blogs?

When you have time, check out some profiles on your favorite sites.

Monitoring Tips and Tricks

There are several ways that you can keep an eye on your environment to know what kind of things are being said about your company, and you as an individual. In the old days, it was common practice for a staffer to scour newspaper headlines and magazines, cut the noteworthy articles out, paste them in a collection, and circulate them in a file folder for everyone to read.

It is much easier to let other members of the company know what's being said in the media, because you can set up Google Alerts to tell you every time your company name or certain keywords are mentioned, search social networking sites, and even coordinate aggregate collections. Whichever methods you use, make sure that you are consistent about looking, and that you have a process set up for responding.

Monitoring processes are especially effective when customers complain. For example, if a customer does not like something about a product you sell and they announce their dissatisfaction on Twitter, your reputation is somewhat restored when you quickly reply and see to their needs. Ignoring their messages, however, means that the complainer can add more and more messages and your lack of response annoys them more and more.

Test Your Knowledge

Where do your messages appear in media, including social media?

What kind of monitoring do you currently do?

Are you using Google Alerts or a similar system effectively?

Do you have a communications company helping you to manage your public image?

What do you need to change? Make notes on your personal action plan.

Further Reading: