

9 Steps to a Rock Solid Crisis Communication Plan

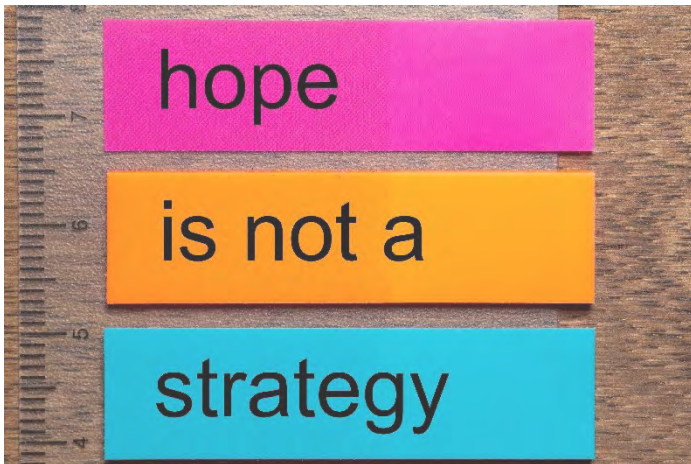
We have
a problem...

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CRISIS MANAGEMENT

9 Steps to a Rock-Solid Crisis Communication Plan

Introduction



FTX. Wells Fargo. Volkswagen. Boeing. Purdue Pharma... just a few of the big brands that have suffered significant losses due to a crisis in recent years. I'm sure you can think of dozens more that have dealt with issues that impacted their brand, reputation and financial strength. Most of them could have minimized the damage if they had done a better job communicating with their stakeholders during the crisis.

Your organization does not have to be a billion-dollar entity to suffer harm from a crisis, including harm to stakeholder trust, reputation, credibility and financial performance.

Nor does your crisis have to make the front page of the *New York Times* to hurt your bottom line. All that has to happen is that *your* stakeholders find out about it from someone other than you, and you fail to respond in a quick, honest and transparent fashion.

In this age of AI-driven bot attacks, 24-hour news cycles, fake news, disinformation and rabid social media, your organization can no longer afford to

pretend that "it won't happen to us." **Because it will. It is only a matter of time.**

Research conducted by the Institute for Crisis Management for the past 35 years has consistently shown that the vast majority of business crises are not the sudden disasters we may see on the evening news. They are human-caused problems that explode into a crisis when they are unknown to (or perpetrated by) management or allowed to smolder until someone finds out and shares the details publicly. Things like fraud, cybercrime, discrimination and harassment, and executives behaving badly can crater a reputation in the blink of an eye. And increasingly, they are first revealed on social media and often driven by AI-generated content.

Planning and preparation are more important than ever to prevent, mitigate and minimize the damage that a crisis can cause. The goals of effective crisis management are prevention, if possible, but if not:

- 1) health and welfare of people;
- 2) safety and security;
- 3) containment;
- 4) minimizing financial impact;
- 5) restoring reputation and trust; and
- 6) returning the organization to "normal."

This Guide is intended to provide practical advice on how to prepare your organization for the inevitable with a rock-solid crisis communication plan.

9 Steps to a Rock-Solid Crisis Communication Plan

Step 1: Know Your Vulnerabilities



Before you begin to write the plan, you must understand the kinds of issues and crises that are most likely to happen, or most potentially damaging to an organization like yours. What *are* your major vulnerabilities? How likely and how much damage can each possibly cause? What kinds of issues are identified in your risk management and business continuity plans? Are there any skeletons in the closet?

What kinds of concerns keep your executives and managers awake at night? The answers to these questions will help drive the content of your plan.

Conduct a plan audit to review current policies, processes and emergency response procedures, if you have any. The new crisis communication plan should integrate seamlessly with current practices for response and business continuity.

Take a look at your competitors, too. What crises have they faced, and how well did they manage them? What did they do well? Where did they stumble? Learn from their mistakes as well as their strengths.

Step 2: Build the Crisis Team

You may not know what the next crisis is going to be, but if you **prepare for the most probable crises**, the better prepared you are for those that are unlikely but can be devastating for your company. Having the right crisis management team to implement those plans is critical to your success.



Depending on the nature and severity of the crisis, you may activate all or a subset of these key players to respond. In addition to executives and operations management, some of the most important people you may need at the crisis table:

- Public Relations/ Communications
- Legal and Compliance
- Marketing
- Finance/ Accounting
- Risk Management
- Information Technology and Security
- Investor Relations
- Human Resources
- Security
- Product Management or Engineering

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Step 3: Draft the Plan



As you start building the framework for your crisis communication plan, think about how you will **integrate communication with operational response and business continuity/ recovery plans.** You may need to develop some new policies, such as a media policy to guide employees on how the company handles press inquiries. A best-practice crisis communication plan should be simple and broad and include the following elements:

1. Overview and Goals
2. Crisis Communications Team Member Responsibilities/ Job Descriptions
3. Assessing Severity Guidelines
4. Criteria for Activating the Plan
5. Authorized Spokespersons
6. Reporting Relationships and Chain of Command
7. Communications Approval Process
8. Media Relations Protocols
9. Disclosure Guidelines
10. Background materials
11. Contact Lists
12. Scenario-specific Playbooks
13. Logs, Worksheets and Checklists
14. Relevant policies

Know Your Stakeholders

It is difficult to change hearts and minds if you don't know what people think about your organization. Long before crisis hits, **know who your stakeholders are and how they feel about your organization.** Are they advocates, adversaries or ambivalents? This knowledge helps to position messaging appropriately.

Consider these stakeholder examples as you build, prioritize and map your own list:

- Activists/ Opponents
- Bankers/Lenders
- Competitors
- Directors
- Customers/Donors
- Employees/ Volunteers
- Employee Families
- Stockholders/Investors
- Financial Analysts
- Government Regulators
- Legislators
- Law enforcement
- Investigative Reporters
- Business neighbors
- Victims
- Plaintiff's Attorneys
- Union Leaders/Members
- Vendors/Suppliers
- Charitable Organizations
- General Public Disgruntled Employees
- Former/Retired Employees Media
- Trade Associations

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Step 4: Scenario Planning

Using the list of probable crises you developed in Step 1, build individual **communication playbooks** that outline initial strategy and steps to take as the crisis unfolds. Each playbook should have an accompanying task list. A typical playbook includes these elements:

1. Situation Overview/Description
2. Crisis Team Participants/ SMEs
3. Communication Priorities
4. Priority Stakeholders
5. Likely Initial Questions/Answers
6. Key Message Themes
7. Communication Channels
8. Initial Media Statement and On-Scene Media Needs
9. Employee Communications Considerations
10. Social Media Needs
11. Additional Scenario-Specific Considerations

Step 5: Leverage Technology

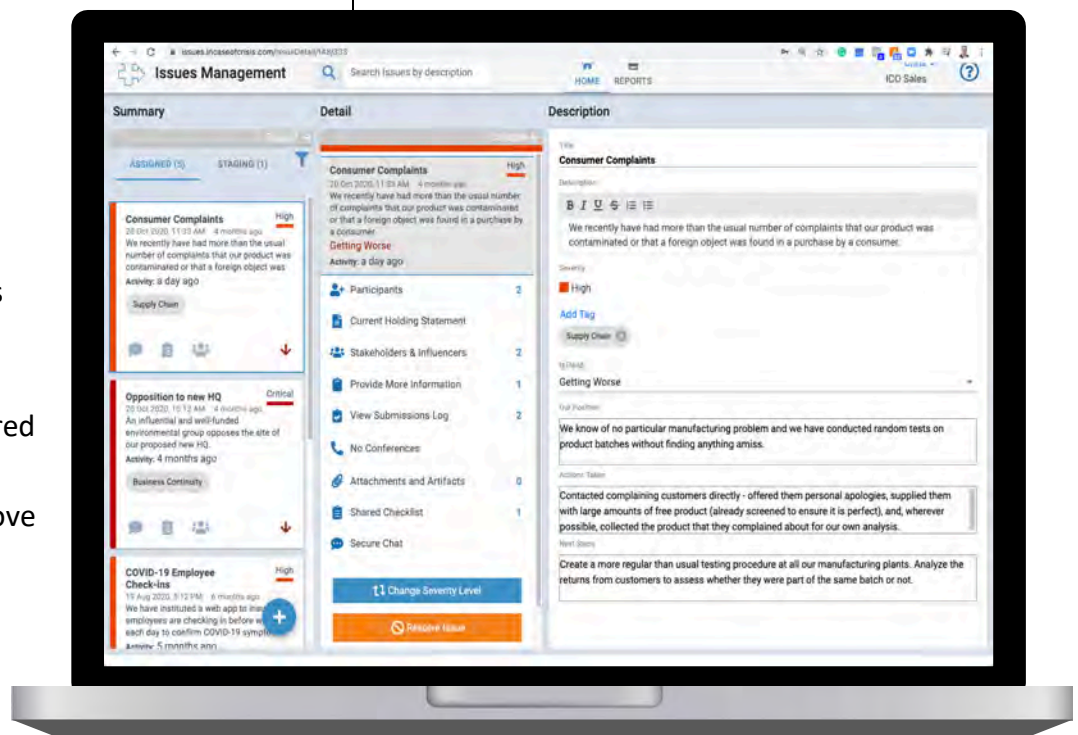
Forget the paper plan! Crisis Management teams need 24/7 access to emergency plans, tasks and notifications, contact lists, incident reporting mechanisms, crisis management and communication plans, forms and checklists. There are a variety of platforms on the market, but ICM has partnered with a leading platform, **In Case of Crisis 365** by RockDove Solutions. ICM develops the crisis plan content, which is brought to life in the **ICOC-365** platform.

Step 6: Build a Dark Web Site

Your company website will become an important communication vehicle when crisis hits. Ideally, your communications will drive people to this site as a single source for accurate, timely information about the event. The middle of the chaos is not the time to have to build pages and populate them with the content your stakeholders are seeking.

Build a “dark site”—a page or series of pages that are built but not published until needed.

Don't forget to include meta data and leverage search engines to drive traffic to the site when it is activated. Design templates with space to fill in the who / what/ where/ when/ why as the situation evolves. Depending on the nature and severity of the crisis, consider replacing your company home page temporarily with the dark site. The page can have its own URL or can live as a sub-page to your main site.



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Step 7: Stay Ahead of Social Media

Social media has advanced significantly in the past few years, and artificial intelligence tools have fueled the rise of **bot-driven viral attacks**. Be prepared with a solid social media crisis strategy paired with powerful social monitoring and analysis tools to stay on top of what stakeholders are saying about you online. Effective use of social media, ideally to drive people to your website, is a critical element of an effective crisis communication plan.



Keep in mind that:

- Ignoring social media won't make it go away
- Social media crises happen in real-time, and must be managed in real-time
- Content is immortal on the Internet
- You can't control what people post about your organization
- You *can* control how you respond to an attack
- Deleting negative comments will probably backfire- badly
- Social media is about transparency, honesty and humanizing a brand
- Respond immediately to key stakeholders at the onset of a crisis
- Be committed to maintaining an open, two-way dialogue
- Listen to stakeholder concerns and address them

- Be honest, transparent, open, and credible
- Build a relationship with your publics before crisis strikes
- Be accountable before the public demands it
- Be flexible and adaptable
- Be human, authentic, and use compassion in all communications
- Monitor all communications in real time

Monitor and analyze discussions and mentions of all the words related to your brand, organization, products and services. Include names, keywords and phrases, names of key players in your organization and industry, and industry-related terms and acronyms.

Don't forget to monitor your competitors' key names and terms, too. Follow journalists and bloggers who write about your company and industry.

We recognize that this is all much easier said than done. But engaging with social media well before a crisis will become important when it is time to mitigate damage and protect reputation. There are a variety of social media platforms that will help you to monitor who talks about your company, where they talk, and what they are saying. Many social monitoring platforms have both free and fee-based versions.

Try out the free versions before you decide whether you need to go for the paid features.

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Step 8: Implementation and Training

Are You Ready?

Once the plan is ready to roll out, it is time for implementation training for the Crisis Management Team.

Your crisis plan will fail if you simply issue it without training the team how to use it.

Spend the time to familiarize the team with the plan's components and conduct tabletop exercises to allow them to practice using the new tools.

Annual Exercises

Preparation is the key to managing the unknown. The most effective crisis management teams conduct regular training exercises, from two-to-four-hour tabletop exercises to full-blown drills. We recommend **conducting exercises at least annually**. Create a realistic scenario and have the team convene and work the problem using your crisis response and communication plans. Include "injects," the twists and turns that are likely to happen as the "crisis" evolves.

Once the session is complete, **take time to debrief** to discuss what went well and what areas of the plan may need to be revised. Consider how the crisis could have been avoided or reduced in magnitude. Were there any unpleasant surprises? What little things really made a positive difference in the response? Are there any holes in the plan?

Capture the learnings from the exercise and embed them into the plan.

Crisis Media Training



It should go without saying that **anyone who will speak publicly on behalf of your organization should first participate in crisis media training**.

In our experience, senior executives who believe they will do a great job at media interviews are often most in need of training and coaching. Doing high-stress media interviews effectively is tough: you can't learn it once and hope to do well several years and little practice later. The best media interviewees practice regularly.

We suggest including crisis media training with annual exercises to keep skills honed and ready. Choose scenarios from your crisis communication plan and prepare tough questions that a reporter might ask. Practice on-camera with playback and constructive feedback to improve skills.

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Step 9: Line Up Additional Support



PR departments are lean operations, and a crisis will put extraordinary demands on an already busy team. That's why we recommend that every organization have a crisis communication consultant lined up and ready to engage if needed. Many public relations consulting firms offer crisis communication services, and there are firms like ICM that specialize in crisis communication.

Develop a relationship with an experienced consultant and make them a member of your crisis management team. Keep them on "speed dial" and take advantage of their expertise to provide needed support amid chaos.

Count on ICM's battle-tested senior consulting team to provide crisis support when you need it most.

Contact Us Today!

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About the Author



Deborah Hileman

SCMP® | FCSCE | CAICP | CCMC

Is President and CEO of the Institute for Crisis Management® (ICM), a boutique firm specializing in crisis management and communications planning, training and

consulting services.

A globally certified corporate crisis management and strategic communication management professional, business leader, trainer, coach and consultant with more than 35 years' experience in public and private companies and non-profit organizations, Ms. Hileman has led high-performing teams in numerous industries.

She understands crisis: She is a FEMA-trained NIMS Incident Commander and certified corporate crisis manager with experience leading crisis planning and preparedness across dozens of industries and countless crises.

Known as a voice of calm in chaos and crisis, Ms. Hileman has earned a reputation as a trusted strategist and advisor to board members and C-suite executives, operations leaders and other organizational stakeholders.

Ms. Hileman has served on several nonprofit organization boards and is chair of the Global Communication Certification Council®, the only ANAB/ISO accredited international certification body for communications professionals.