Communications in a crisis

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The COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing crisis creating fundamental changes for workplaces throughout the country. Most businesses are now operating remotely, and others have had to cease operations in the short-term. Under these new circumstances, it is important to ensure that staff know what to do, and clients understand how they can continue to engage with you during this crisis. This Guidance Note will direct businesses how to manage communications to staff and key stakeholders during these uncertain times.

What is crisis management?

Unforeseen and unwelcome events can impact an organisation at any time. In some cases, you may have some warning (for example, an industrial dispute or a failure in your supply chain), and in unprecedented global pandemics including COVID-19, warning is unlikely. Natural disasters, accidents, stakeholder activism, crime, the loss of a key partner or contract and economic pressures are just some of the other events that could precipitate a crisis that may cause damage to your reputation and lost earnings.

Crisis management broadly involves:

- identifying a crisis
- forming a crisis team
- monitoring the situation
- taking restorative action
- communicating to stakeholders
- post-crisis, learning from the experience and adjusting the way you work if necessary

Why is communication important?

Communicating effectively and managing the messages you share with stakeholders, either directly or through the media, can make the difference between customers, investors and the public staying with you or turning against you. In the event of a crisis materialising, one of the first things your crisis team should do is to create a mission statement, outlining the team's purpose, objectives and the top two or three messages you want to share with your audience.

You then need to select audiences for the mission statement, including:

- employees
- customers
- members of the public
- the media
- government representatives and/or regulators
- emergency services
- special interest groups
- activists
- analysts and investors

For each audience, you need to agree what the message should be and who is going to deliver it, how they will do this and when.

When doing this planning, bear in mind:

- your nominated spokespeople will not be the only people approached by the media and members of the public. Make sure all employees are briefed with a short and sensible answer to any enquires and know how they should pass enquiries on. A phrase such as: 'Of course we're working on X, my colleague would be more than happy to tell you more about it, can I take your details so they can give you a call?' gives a better impression than: 'I've been told I can't talk about X'
- you are unlikely to get to choose when the media spotlight hits you. If you don't get your side of the story out when it does, coverage and commentary won't go away. Decide your position promptly, be open and honest and, if the situation is severe enough or you don't feel confident, engage professional communications support at the first signs of difficulty
- using simple language is usually the best policy. In a severe crisis, a senior representative of the company, usually the MD or CEO, should deliver key messages personally and keep it simple rather than trying to hide behind jargon or statistics
- you should identify and share next steps and remedial actions as much as you can. Make sure you keep updating your audiences on demonstrable progress. Keep updates frequent and focused on actions you're taking
- you need to keep the lines of communication open. Monitor media coverage. Listen to employees and other stakeholders. Ensure different teams in your business are sharing information and keeping the crisis team up to date

Communicating with staff:

With COVID-19 measures requiring remote working for many, the manner of written communication becomes even more important. Whereas under normal circumstances staff can often clarify points with the author of written communication in person, or even through discussion with teammates, this becomes more challenging when working from home.

It is vital that all email and other communications are thoroughly reviewed for clarity by a nominated person. Having one person designated as a communications officer will help to ensure messages have a consistent tone and message, and that they don't dilute or contradict any earlier statements.

Ensure that all people managers are briefed on major communications before they are sent and encourage them to follow up with their direct reports to check if they have questions.

Holding daily team standup meetings (virtually, for a remote working environment) for 10-15 minutes with no fixed agenda is an excellent opportunity to re-state or clarify important messages and to allow people the opportunity to ask questions or share feedback.

The same advice applies regardless of the size of organisation. A smaller business may consist of fewer people, but the need to keep staff well informed in a clear, structured manner is no less important.

Writing effective messages:

When drafting messages to staff, consider these questions:

- How will your audience receive this message? Will they feel positive, negative or indifferent? Ensure you consider this before you start writing.
- How much time do you think your audience will be able to give to reading your message? Make sure you tailor the length and medium of your message to suit.
- Can you incorporate visuals into your communication? Using pictures will help your message get through and be remembered more easily. Posters, messages on your intranet and desk-drop

leaflets can all help. If you need to release a series of announcements, say on a new way of working, then you could even consider getting a logo designed for the initiative.

- What is the main idea you want to convey, or action you want people to take? Start your message with this information, and then add any important supporting points, such consequences or reasons to take action. Finally, include any further detail, such as the context or decision-making process.
- Who is the best person to deliver the message? Sometimes you can appoint champions to get your message across to their peers or use leaders in your business to communicate on your behalf with their teams. In other scenarios, you might find it more impactful to send a message yourself, either because they should come from you (eg changes in your own team), or because it helps to build your profile in the organisation (eg launch of a new improvement initiative). Equally, this may be a chance to develop someone in your team by letting them lead the communications.

Creating your message—some quick do's and don’ts:

Do:

- make your key point at the start of the message;
- highlight any next steps or actions the recipient must take;
- explain why these steps are important;
- make it clear if there are no next steps;
- make it clear if there are consequences for not acting as directed;
- be sensitive in difficult situations;
- work with HR if you are communicating changes in structure or terms of employment;
- build in time to get feedback from other people;
- avoid writing any email more than 150 words long;
- make any reminders and follow-up notes shorter than the original message;
- use supporting pictures, as well as words;
- remember people may use tablets and smartphones for work email, so check what your electronic communications look like on smaller formats;
- use bullet points and plain English throughout; and
- make it clear if you are communicating with an audience in confidence or under embargo (though take into consideration that your message may still leak).

Don't:

- use humour unless it is appropriate, and you have tested it with your audience;
- use technical language unless it is absolutely necessary;
- use internal acronyms and jargon, they will alienate anyone who doesn’t know what they mean;
- send out any communications that haven’t been proof-read by at least one other person;
- send out messages on a Monday morning unless you absolutely must;
- say anything in widely-broadcast message that you would not be happy to say in front of the press or a customer—messages do leak.

Communicating with clients:

When planning for any kind of crisis:

- For all communications sent on behalf of the organisation, nominate a single spokesperson (generally a senior position-holder) and address all client-facing communications from them.
- Keep it simple rather than using lots of jargon or statistics.

- Where appropriate, have an appropriate member of staff follow up with a personal note offering to answer any questions.
- Your spokesperson will likely not be the person approached by clients, the media and members of the public. Make sure all staff are briefed with a short and sensible answer to any enquires and know how they should pass enquiries on. A phrase such as: 'Of course we're working on X, my colleague would be more than happy to tell you more about it, can I take your details so they can give you a call?' gives a better impression than: 'I've been told I can't talk about X'.
- Media training for key staff may be beneficial if there is likely to be media interest.
- Decide your position promptly, be open and honest ensure everyone in client-facing roles is comfortable fielding queries.
- Make sure you keep updating your audiences on actual developments. Keep updates regular and focused on actions you're taking, but don't communicate just for the sake of it.
- You need to keep the lines of communication open. Monitor media coverage. Listen to employees and other stakeholders. Ensure different teams in your business are sharing information and keeping the crisis team up to date.

What role does social media play?

The increased use of tools such as Twitter, which are not currently bound by the same reporting constraints as traditional media, can escalate crisis situations or even in some cases, cause them. Consumer and stakeholder activists can use Twitter to generate negative publicity about your organisation that is then picked up in the conventional media.

If you're dealing with a crisis and Twitter can help, then use it. For example, Twitter updates from your corporate feed could provide affected customers with regular, reliable updates in the event of a service outage.

When briefing staff, you may wish to ask them to refrain from commenting on the situation on social media. Or, depending on the nature of the crisis, it may be appropriate to give them some guidelines about what they can say and encourage them to participate.

To help avoid a social media-led crisis, you may wish to consider investing in some simple online monitoring for your company name. Depending on the nature of your business, this may be best run by your marketing or customer service function and will give you an early indication of any stakeholder complaints that you may be able to address before they escalate.

Why should the legal team get involved?

In the event of a crisis, it's likely that your company will be under greater public scrutiny and subject to more media coverage than normal. Depending on the situation, there may be legal or regulatory implications to consider in terms of what is said and what is reported. As well as advising on the content of messages from a legal perspective, you should also be monitoring what is being said about your organisation by others, so you can take action if necessary.

How can the legal team prepare for a crisis?

The company's legal representative should be involved in contingency planning, which will allow your company to prepare for and practice responding in a crisis. Ask to see what contingency plans have been prepared for possible eventualities such as:

- a natural disaster disrupting operations
- loss of a significant customer or partner
- mass customer or stakeholder action

Also, consider any potential legal or regulatory threats, where you may be expected to lead the crisis team, such as:

- bribery or corrupt practices
- a competition investigation
- the discovery of fraud or other criminal activity by one of your senior leaders

Time spent considering what could happen, how you would react and who would need to be involved will make your reactions faster and more effective if the worst does happen.

Checklist

- Planning for potential disasters—what could go wrong? Do you know how you would respond? Do you have access to information (contact details for key personnel, for example) in a disaster situation?
- Identifying a crisis—what has happened? What's the likely impact on your business? What are the financial repercussions? Is this serious enough to warrant specialist communications support?
- Forming the crisis team—who's involved? What are their skills? What are their roles in the team? Who has been media trained?
- Putting together a mission statement for the crisis team—what's the team trying to achieve? What are the obstacles? What are the top two or three messages you need to get across?
- Monitoring the situation—who is doing this? Are you monitoring social media, such as Twitter, as well as the press?
- Identifying your audiences—who do you need to talk to? What is the impact of the situation on them? How will you reach them?
- Planning your messages—what are you trying to communicate? How is this different for each of your audiences?
- Drafting your messages—is your language simple and easy to understand? Have you checked your legal position? Are you being open and honest?
- Briefing employees outside the crisis team—what's your message to them? Have you given them guidelines on how to talk to people outside the company? Have you given them guidelines on talking about the situation on social media?
- Post-crisis—what have you learnt? What did you do well? What would you have done differently? How can you prevent this situation arising again?