

Crisis Survival

What is a crisis? It's the point where you've lost control of the situation.

Who declares a public crisis? Usually, the media.

What are the elements of a crisis? Often, unabated human impact, environmental harm, economic or political damage.

When is the crisis over? When control returns, as defined by publicly accepted goals identified at the outset.

Tips for managing a crisis situation

Jump on misreporting fast and with both feet.

- Most reporters build their stories off the last story. Don't let bad information become history.

You can be right and still be dead if you are not empathetic in your messaging.

- Data is just data. While it's true that data drives decisions, if people don't see *and hear you recognizing impact and prioritizing human well-being*, you're not in a position to lead. Couch your actions and words around human end-goals.

Don't let media coverage drive your action.

- The way out of a crisis is the series of actions that re-establish control of a situation. This is done when leaders carefully craft a plan, execute it and communicate progress.
- Most crises don't happen overnight, and they are not resolved overnight. When leadership buckles to the pressure of critical press and abandons the plan in an effort to look responsive, the crisis can continue indefinitely.

All partners need to share in the process.

- The JIC is the wrong place to make new friends.
- Continual coordination with partner agencies keeps everyone aligned and in their lanes.

Communicate regularly. Communicate carefully.

- Media will work to keep a story going. They'll ask questions to which there may be no answers. They'll conjure hypothetical situations to create new storylines. They'll push for answers that don't yet exist to cut new ground on the story.
- **Regular updates** are important because reporters need to feed the cycle, and you need to continue being the source of news.
- Don't wait long periods to gather loads of new information. Make information available as it comes in and gets validated.
- Focus on sharing new information in confined terms, and closing every communications update by restating the end objective. It might sometimes feel light, but it helps everyone – including the response team, the media, and the public – to keep their eye on what's important instead of what is yet unknown.
- Go to where the conversation is happening. Responding to social media posts with mainstream media updates won't work.
- Maintain a public listening network. Crisis communication is as much about knowing what the public is saying as what you're saying. Commit some staff to monitoring communication channels and flagging rumors.

Recognize when you're navigating off the map.

- **Remember**, facts and data are not the same as knowledge. They are limited windows to knowledge. One hallmark of a serious crisis are the surprise facts that sometimes dramatically alter knowledge.
- The facts you hold in-hand might be incorrect, or misleading, or providing an incomplete picture. Tread cautiously, speak generally, and couch your message in broad-goal terms with the understanding that you don't know everything.

Don't let your people get ambushed.

- The continual teeter totter of wanting to be transparent versus allowing enough access to risk bad reporting hurt your credibility or situational control is tough to manage. Err on the side of control. A story about an unprepared public official distracts from what crisis update reporting should be about.
- Just because the press wants unfettered access to untrained subject matter experts or top leadership does not mean you owe it to them.
- **Who speaks?** The answer is, whoever is in best position to deliver the message and take questions. Don't trot-out top leadership if they're unprepared.
- **Cutting a bad interview** is one of the toughest choices you will make in your job. It also is potentially one of the most important. Think carefully about how to do it quickly and cleanly.

Never Guess. Never Lie. "I don't know" is the only answer when it's true.

- Above all else, surviving crisis is about public confidence. If you lose credibility, you've lost the only way back.