



Crisis Communications



April 21, 2022

Goals today

- Examine what a crisis is really about
- Discuss your role & goals
- Share YOUR crisis experiences
- Examine some famous crises for learning
- Learn ways to use each event to be more effective in the next one
- Learn to manage social media in a crisis
- What else?

What's a crisis, anyway?

Dictionary says:

noun, plural cri·ses [krah-y-seez].

A stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is determined; ***turning point***.

A condition of instability or danger, as in social, economic, political, or international affairs, leading to a decisive change.

Wurfel says:

Crisis in government is the moment when events cause leaders to acknowledge lost control of a situation. The duration of the crisis is the time span until order (and public confidence) is **restored**.

Crisis has many forms

- Public health emergencies - pandemics
- Weather events - tornadoes, floods, wildfires
- Leadership events - Governors caught in scandals, leaders assassinated or incapacitated
- Government systems failure - Unemployment computer system snafu
- Major oil spill - Environmental crisis
- Government shutdowns - partisan gridlock
- Nuclear plant mishap
- Domestic terrorism

Is it a crisis yet?

Universal elements of a crisis

- Something has diverged from normal
- Control of a situation is lost
- **People are affected**
- Leadership and systems are unable to function
- Situation is intense; people revert to panic behaviors
- Often, some portion or aspect of the situation is *unknown*, hidden, or not understood

Peloton CEO admits mistake, recalls treadmills after child's death and 72 injuries

Updated 11:26 AM; Today 11:23 AM



(Photo courtesy of Peloton) Peloton

Hell rarely breaks loose. It more often walks in.

Take steps today to be ready tomorrow

- Are you participating in training drills?
- Have you met emergency partners?
- Have you got your office on a thumb drive?
- Have you SWOT-audited your operation?

Crises are about people

Refer to handout, “Managing people in a crisis”

Communicating around a crisis

Each event is a thread woven into the history of the event, and every communication colors that thread.

***Crisis response is actions.
Crisis management is
communicating those
actions.***



10 rules for crisis communications

Refer to handout,
“10 Rs in a crisis”

The first 48 hours

By the time you smell smoke, the fire has probably been going for a bit.

- Determine the knowns & unknowns
- Assemble the team
- Create the plan & assign roles
- Communicate the situation internal and external
- Set the path for restoring 'normal'
- Set the expectation for communicating changes
- Monitor press and social. Rumor control is top priority

How / when to update

- Updates to the public should have a regular cadence. Train your followers / audiences.
- Vet all shared info, but don't sit on updates for large info “dumps.”
- Don't prolong Q&A sessions. They'll get off topic.
- Engage the conversation where it's happening (social v. mainstream v. live events)
- Use social media to update in real time (FB live and YouTube live for example)

Who speaks?

- Determine messenger early and be consistent.
- Avoid choosing by **title size**. Reserve leadership for major announcements.
- Comms people can be interchanged, leadership cannot.
- The messenger's job is delivery. Amassing, vetting and clearing information should be a team effort.
- The answer to “who speaks?” is, who is best equipped to be effective at it?

Social media and crisis

“A lie can make it halfway around the world before the truth has time to tie its shoes.”

Asset ... or liability.

Social media runs with scissors

Social is a public square in real time.

Your 'square' is as big as your following.

Beyond the numbers, WHO is following you?

You want it as a communications tool. Others want it for their own reasons.

Plan for how you will use it to help manage a crisis, but plan ahead for how it can be misused and how you will monitor and control your social media channels.

Social media in your crisis plan

DO

Establish, publish and enforce rules for your social channels.

Dedicate experienced staff to manage your social channels.

Establish listening tools (like a Google alert) for your department, public-facing leadership, and top situation keywords.

Use social media to surveil, for rumor control, and to break news.

Social media crisis plan

DO NOT

Delete, hide or turn off comments

Block people (when avoidable)

Argue with people on your page

Behave differently in offline chats

When the crisis drags on

- Reporters and social platforms will poke the situation until there's something new to tell. Lead the conversation to maintain your position.
- If you go quiet, it does not mean the story goes quiet.
- People can normalize nearly any living condition; but a fraction will always lean eventually toward revolt.
- Crises are rarely ever political, but response activities almost inevitably are *politicized*. Be aware of your surroundings.

On fatigue and empathy...

The BP Gulf oil spill of 2010

- 200 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico
- Spill lasted **87 days**
- **16,000 miles** of coast affected: Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida
- **11 people dead**. 17 seriously injured.
- **\$40 billion** cleanup and fines to BP.
- **\$20 billion** response fund from federal government.



Geologist / CEO Tony Hayward

"The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume."

"I think the environmental impact of this disaster is likely to be very, very modest."

"The first thing to say is I'm sorry. We're sorry for the massive disruption it's caused their lives. There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back."

When the crisis is over

- When is the crisis over?
- Risk of announcing
- Cost of silence
- How to announce



After the crisis -- External



Storytelling can help the public recognize your efforts and results.

After the crisis - internal

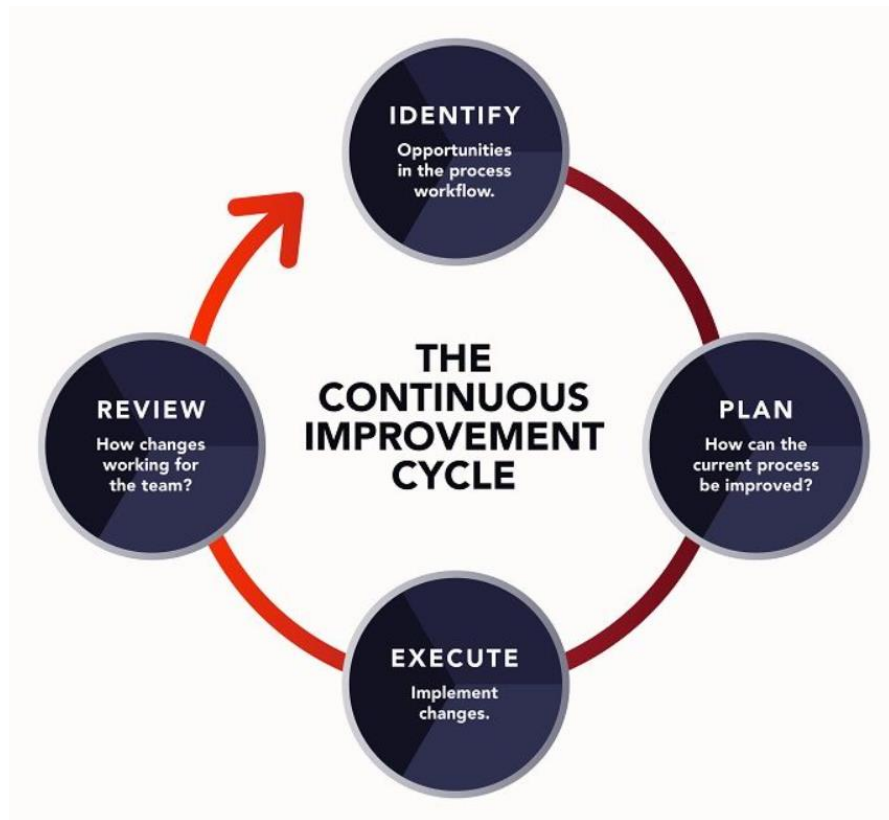
- Leadership should communicate to staff directly
- Employees need to know the story of what they just went through
- Department culture has its own tapestry
- Efforts and results need to be recognized
- Caution: Pretend the public is watching

Reputation recovery is a process

- Own your mistakes
- Learn from your experiences
- Do not stop doing your job
- Keep engaging
- Public service sometimes means public scrutiny

Keys to a great hot wash

It's about continuous improvement



Four questions

- What were our best moments / decision / highlights?
- What made them good?
- What went poorly / could have been better?
- What can we do to not repeat those things?

- Participants must be comfortable responding frankly.
- Often, tough to get the group together after prolonged crisis.

Discussion



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