



Managing people in a crisis

A crisis is a situation affecting people. Absent an impact to people, there likely is just circumstance.

Managing a crisis means bringing the situation back under control, but it also means helping communities recognize and accept that danger has passed.

People in a crisis have fears, expectations, questions, emotions, and more.

Most often, when responders struggle to bring a crisis under control, it is because they're heavily focused on one side of this equation – action to address the situation. It is a natural response – a fire, a flood, a tornado, a toxic spill or a pandemic demand immediate action.

Responder teams are trained to focus on restoring order based on addressing the situation.

In chaotic response environments, the effort expended to contemplate and manage affected or involved *people* often falls short. Critics in the community become a polarizing force, chipping away at trust, raising unrest, affecting decisions, and making it more difficult to resolve the crisis.

Bringing a crisis under control requires restoring public confidence the crisis has passed.

Crisis is always about people.



Account for people in your crisis response

Do not discount fear. People fear the unknown, feeling helpless, and things they don't understand because it renders them unable to assess risk. It causes them to behave irrationally. Take the time to contemplate how a situation sparks fear in a community and how to address it.

Actively empathize. Empathy in messaging is obviously important. But if you haven't taken time to consider and discuss specific, personal ways a situation affects a community – physically, mentally and socially – your messaging may sound like lip service. Empathy comes from understanding, and understanding takes some effort. It is worth the time spent on it.

Give people something to do. Helplessness is an intolerable feeling during a crisis. Consider ways people can take control of their own situation or volunteer to help restore order.

Showcase locals. When major events bring large responder teams onto a scene, local community members often feel like outsiders are in charge and not looking out for local interests. Showcase local people who are part of the team. Seeing and hearing from them adds credibility to the response effort.

Identify and incorporate local community leaders, critics, and groups. Bring key figures “behind the curtain” when possible, whether it is a private briefing or to trade information and gain perspective of local niche audiences. Misinformation and rumor spread quickly; so do offline earnest gestures and genuine consideration. Recovery is a community effort. Give everyone a role.

Credibility is trust. Losing one is losing the other. Guard them carefully by being transparent, accurate and diligent in your work, because leading is nearly impossible without them.

Avoid raising defenses. Allowing the response team to grow defensive to criticism raises barriers to understanding. Accept and weigh all criticism. Understanding a critic does not mean agreeing with them. It means being able to see other points of view.