

DON'T WAIT UNTIL IT'S TOO LATE! EIGHT VITAL STEPS BEFORE A CRISIS HITS

It's only a matter of time before your city government finds itself in a crisis of some type. It may not happen in the next day, in the next week, or in the next month. But make no mistake, it will happen. Set a plan in motion now so that when a crisis does occur, your city government won't be caught by surprise.

Sometimes the hardest part is knowing how and where to get started. Every crisis will have its own unique features that demand their own particular responses, but here are eight steps you should take immediately to serve as the foundation of any crisis communications plan.

1. CREATE A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

Creating a crisis communications team is crucial for any organization to adequately respond to a crisis. The team should consist of city leaders who represent various points of view that are critical to planning for a crisis and responding when one occurs. Only those critical to the team should be on it. A team that's too large can't make decisions quickly. Keep the team to no more than six or seven individuals. The crisis communications team is essential to identify what actions should be taken. It could be chaired by the mayor or city manager and should include staff key to government operations and the specific situation, including representatives from the following city offices:

- Public Relations/Communications
- Legal Office
- Public Safety
- Elected Official

The crisis communications team plays two vital roles in crisis management. It is responsible for coming up with a plan of action for any possible crisis scenario and laying the groundwork so that your city isn't caught off guard in an extraordinary event. And it is responsible for directing the city when the event unfolds and the plan crafted by the team is put into action.

Once the team is selected, develop a list of team members that includes contact information and what each is responsible for. It is essential that this contact information be updated continuously; a specific individual should be tasked with that responsibility. Gather the team members for a briefing on their appointment to the Crisis Communications Team and likely roles and responsibilities. Identify the members of the team who should serve as the initial core decision-making team.

2. IDENTIFY A SPOKESPERSON

It's difficult enough to stand in a room full of reporters who are yelling out questions, with cameras capturing your every movement and word. You can only imagine how the pressure of the moment can increase in a crisis situation. The media want answers now. The public is waiting to hear from its leaders. The person you choose to put in front of those reporters, microphones and cameras must be someone you can trust and depend on in a highly tense and difficult situation.

Your spokesperson(s) should come across as being trustworthy, sincere, calm and confident – qualities that could actually help to diffuse a tense situation. They must be firm and unwavering in their comments to help build trust. They must be compassionate to be able to relate to the general public. The job is tough. The person chosen for the job must be strong.

In addition, you should designate individuals who will serve as technical experts or advisors. This will take some brainstorming by the crisis communications team, since it's not always apparent what is needed. Notify technical experts that they have been designated as an ad hoc member of the crisis communications team, and identify their possible roles and responsibilities.

The person(s) you choose to be the "face" of your city government during a crisis should be:

- Comfortable in front of TV cameras and with reporters – skilled in handling media, skilled in answering questions while sticking to key messages, able to speak without using jargon, respectful of the reporters' role, and knowledgeable about your city government and the crisis at hand.
- Credible: Able to establish credibility with the media and project confidence to the audience, able to come across as sincere, straightforward and believable, and able to remain calm in stressful situations.

These are highly intense, stressful situations and your primary spokesperson will need time to prepare – and to rest – during an actual crisis. It's important not to overload the spokesperson with other duties as well.

Finally, strongly consider media training for your spokesperson. Even the best spokesperson can use some extra practice in front of a camera before a crisis hits.

3. IDENTIFY POTENTIAL CATALYSTS

Once a team and spokesperson(s) have been identified, it is their job now to spot possible crises that could impact your city. The team should conduct "What If?" exercises, or an audit, to help cover possible scenarios.

Look at your city's recent history. Have there been events that easily could have developed into a crisis? Check with crisis teams in other cities to find out what issues they might be prepared for. Check the headlines – there could be a news event capable of affecting your community.

The more potential crises you can identify, the better prepared you'll be when that event actually happens and your crisis communications team is called into action. Your hard work and preparation could head off the crisis before things really escalate.

Once you have developed a thorough list of potential crises, conduct training to prepare for different scenarios. Conduct mock drills and put your plan into effect. See where changes need to be made, what works and what doesn't. The only way to be ready for a significant event is to practice so everyone understands how their role fits into the overall picture.

4. SET UP A PROTOCOL FOR HANDLING CALLS FROM THE MEDIA/OUTSIDE

Responding to questions from the media is a critical responsibility of the crisis communications team. Make sure all employees know it's not their role to answer the media's questions, but instead they should refer these calls to the designated spokesperson. In an actual emergency, media calls should be answered promptly, in order to prevent the spread of rumors and ill-informed speculation.

5. KEY MESSAGES

During a crisis, a prepared statement for the media should be released as quickly as possible. Preparing a statement from scratch can take some time, so it's imperative that you develop a series of general statements and key messages that can be used early in a crisis situation. Those statements can be considered and prepared well before an emergency situation occurs, so they already reflect the general thinking of city leaders. These statements don't have to be long and detailed, but they can play a vital role in helping the city get out in front of the news. It's important to promptly establish the authority of city leaders during a crisis, and having general statements ready in advance will help you achieve that goal.

Here are some examples of prepared statements that can be used as a foundation to quickly respond to different kinds of crises:

"The safety of the public is our main priority. We are responding to the situation and will have an update on the matter as soon as we get new information."

"Our hearts go out to the victims of this senseless act. Be assured that we are using every resource available to us to identify and apprehend the person responsible. We won't rest until we do."

"We are aware of the claims being made. We are currently looking into the matter to assess whether there is any validity behind the claims and will provide additional information as soon as it is available."

While the initial statement is being finalized, front-line personnel who handle calls would provide a statement similar to: "Facts are still being gathered, but we will hold a press conference before 3 p.m. If you'll give me your name and number, we will be sure to call you back to let you know the time."

6. DEVELOP A MEDIA LIST

Identify reporters with local media who can be contacted during a potential crisis. This listing should include media representatives who specialize in certain specific topics and would be contacted only when circumstances apply to those topics – for example, an education reporter would not routinely be contacted for a bridge collapse but could be called for a chemical spill near a school). Make sure the list is complete and updated frequently, including names, publications, titles, email addresses, and work and mobile numbers.

7. IDENTIFY KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Who are the important audiences you need to be communicating with during specific crises? Are they internal or external? How are you going to reach them?

Whether they are city residents or city employees, it's important that you identify how you are going to reach your intended audience with the relevant information most necessary to communicate to them.

Every municipal employee is a representative of your city and should be viewed as an important stakeholder. So it's vital that they are kept abreast of the developing crisis and know what they are supposed to say and do. It is crucial to determine in advance how best to communicate with them.

That also holds true, of course, for the public at large. You need to stay ahead of the spread of information, making sure you are effectively communicating all necessary information accurately to the residents of your city.

Identify different platforms that allow you to transmit the information to the greatest number of people. Whether that means using traditional news media in the form of written statements and press conferences ... posting social media messages on Facebook and Twitter ... or sending direct communications such as email – you must have a plan ready to direct how you will get your messages out.

8. DESIGNATE A COMMAND CENTER

When responding to a breaking crisis, the last thing you need to worry about is finding the right people or information. A fragmented crisis team is likely to result in a fragmented response.

A centralized command center is an extremely important resource when a crisis is quickly unfolding. It strategically places all key figures from your city's crisis communications team in a central location, allowing the most efficient and effective coordination among all those involved in the response.

The flow of all information should come to and from this central location, in order to ensure that all elements of your team are operating with the same information. Take time now to locate an area that would best serve as a command center, making sure it has:

- Phones
- Televisions with working cable connections
- Computer/Internet connections
- Backup generators (certain disasters produce power outages, particularly in hurricane-vulnerable Florida)
- Office supplies/white boards

If the best available location is lacking some of these essentials, create an emergency supply toolkit that can easily be brought into the command center on short notice.