



Crisis Communication Simulation: Teaching Note

Safe First not so safe anymore? Safe First Insurance Ltd in turmoil

A simulation designed for academic purposes to illustrate the challenges and the importance of effective communication during crisis situations. Ideal for use in advanced leadership communication classes; media/PR classes; executive workshops for business leaders and/or strategic communication professionals. This is the instructor/facilitator's guide.

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Overview

The objective of this simulation exercise is to prepare participants to better manage crises in their organization from a communications perspective. During a crisis the communication needs of an organization quadruple and building trust with one's publics is essential in effectively managing crisis situations. Communication is key in building trust and strengthening the relationship of the organization with its stakeholders.

This simulation may be used in advanced public relations and communication classes, as well as academic and/or professional workshops in media/PR and strategic communications. Also appropriate for business courses covering crisis management as a topic.

Learning Outcomes

- Appreciate the crisis communication complexity and challenges in modern times.
- Understand the value of effective communication at the time of crisis.
- Understand and apply the basic principles of effective crisis communication management.
- Learn how to deal with the media during crises.
- Develop message communication maps for different shareholder groups and draft scripts for emergency scenarios.

The learning outcomes are achieved in an environment of experiential learning and increased student engagement, with facilitation and guidance by the instructor. This is done through student participation in a series of decision-making challenges, discussion assessing the choices made, consideration of challenges and implications, as well as role plays.

Structure

The simulation consists of 5 modules, each geared at addressing different aspects of crisis communication. It may be administered in its entirety (recommended) or by selecting different modules. However, the modules are sequential and the scenarios are designed to simulate an escalated crisis within an organization. Instructors selecting specific modules, therefore, should take that into account and adapt the exercises accordingly.

Each module begins with a description of the scenario. Through presentation and role playing the "story" is described, providing participants with some context and key pieces of information. The scenarios are first read by the instructor and then distributed to students/participants for their reference.

Workgroups are then given tasks to complete – to make specific choices or answer specific questions . The workgroups discuss and complete these tasks using tools from the Crisis Communication Simulation Toolkit. The administration and distribution of those tools is handled by the instructor.

The workgroup responses and their associated positive and negative consequences form the basis for plenary discussion. The instructor takes the opportunity to highlight crisis communication principles, address issues raised by student answers, correct misconceptions or responses, if necessary, and make connections with class material.

Set up and Role of Participants

Ideal Number of Participants

In order to facilitate discussion in workgroups and in plenary, the ideal number of participants are approximately 24 to 32 participants, allowing for four workgroups of 6 to 8 individuals. Instructors can however work around that and adjust accordingly for smaller or larger classes.

Module 1: Transparency and Information Release

Purpose: In Module 1 participants will confront a practical challenge of deciding what information is released and what information is withheld about an emerging crisis.

Material/Equipment Checklist:

- ▶ Computer and LCD projector
- ▶ Flipcharts, white boards or chalk boards one for each workgroup
- ▶ Simulation Toolkit

Step	Topic/Activity	Time ¹	Handouts
1.	Scenario Description	10 min	Module 1 Scenario
2.	Workgroup Task	15 min	
3.	Debrief (workshop answers and discussion)	30 min	From Toolkit: Communication during an emergency: Decision Making Tool

Module 1---Suggested Answers/Highlights

- 1) Effective crisis communication is based on a) accuracy of information; b) speed of delivery; c) transparency; d) empathy. These are the principles students are expected to follow throughout the simulation.
- 2) Recognize the need to release a statement to the media as soon as possible (highlight importance of transparency and speed of delivery.)
- 3) Recognize that the news would already be out; on social media first and then on traditional media. Therefore, the decision should be to go ahead with an early announcement.
- 4) The press release needs to be revised:
 - a) Do not talk about a bomb; that is not known yet. Better to say explosion.
 - a) Need to add that the building is now evacuated.
 - b) Keep the rest of the information. Accept grammar/stylistic improvements.
 - c) Discuss whether “restore business operations” should be kept. Some might think it is not empathetic enough (talk about business when such a serious incident has taken place), but this might affect customers, therefore, it might be essential information for the public. Both answers would be acceptable, if justified.

¹ Times are estimated based on classes of 24---32 students; times will vary depending on the number of participants and the level of the class (more advanced classes tend to elicit more discussion and debate, which affects timing).

Module 2: Development of Key Messages

Purpose: In Module 2 students/participants will learn how to develop key messages for effective communication during crises.

Material/Equipment Checklist:

- ▶ Computer and LCD projector
- ▶ Flipcharts, white boards or chalk boards one for each workgroup
- ▶ Simulation Toolkit

Step	Topic/Activity	Time	Handouts
1.	Scenario Description	10 min	Module 2 Scenario
2.	Workgroup Task: Development of key messages	30 min	From Toolkit: -----Message Map Template -----Developing messages during a crisis
3.	Debrief (workshop answers and discussion)	40 min	

Module 2 Suggested Answers/Highlights

Answers should reflect the following general principles:

- Recognize and acknowledge public anger, frustration, fear, outrage or concern
- Provide three or more positive points to counter negative information or bad news
- Accept and involve the public and the media as legitimate partners
- Indicate company shares public concerns
- Convey compassion, conviction and optimism
- Gain trust by admitting that there are things you do not know.

Suggested Key Messages

- ▶ Key Message 1: Status update: human losses and injuries. Empathetic message; condolences and prayers to families of deceased. State what company does for employees in the hospital and families of victims (i.e., maybe covering all hospital bills; activating Employee Assistance Program, providing counselling, etc.)
- ▶ Key Message 2: Status update: operational. Where customers should go to get served. Ensure customers all policies valid and not at risk.
- ▶ Key Message 3: Next steps. State company fully cooperating with police and other authorities. Maybe running its own investigation. Ensure you will keep the public informed; state when the next update will be issued.

Further, some points to highlight during the debrief are:

- ▶ Do NOT release names of victims; this is personal private data. Only the Police may release such information. The company public statement may state how many employees were killed, their gender and age.
- ▶ Acknowledge that families of victims should be notified first, BEFORE the public announcement is issued.
- ▶ Police guidelines should not be duplicated in Safe First's public announcements. A simple statement to the effect of "please adhere to all public authorities' guidelines" would be sufficient. Do not try to say too much in your communications. Stick to your own company's affairs.
- ▶ One should not comment at all on the alleged bomb threat call; it is at this point only a rumor. Do not make it a bigger story. Do NOT speculate.
- ▶ Internal details, such as loss of physical documents, relocation of staff, access to the building, etc., should not be included in the public statement. This should of course be communicated to internal stakeholders, but via other communication channels. Module 4 will address that specifically.

Module 3: Communication Coordination

Purpose: In Module 3 students/participants will explore the challenge and opportunity of effective communication coordination during a crisis.

Material/Equipment Checklist:

- ▶ Computer and LCD projector
- ▶ Flipcharts, white boards or chalk boards one for each workgroup
- ▶ Simulation Toolkit

Step	Topic/Activity	Time	Handouts
1.	Scenario Description	10 min	Module 3 Scenario
2.	Workgroup Task: Partner Identification	30 min	From Toolkit: Crisis Communication Channel Map Template
3.	Debrief (workshop answers and discussion)	30 min	From Toolkit: Emergency Communication Coordination

Module 3 Suggested Answers/Highlights

Partner Identification

- 1) The specific partners involved in a given emergency will vary based on the nature of the problem. Each emergency calls for its own emergency communication partner list.
- 2) The core question informing the compilation of such a list is: In this type of emergency, what other organizations are likely to be engaged in public communication activities? This can then be broken down into some of the general categories of potential partners, such as government organizations, NGOs, etc.
- 3) Highlight emergency communication collaboration principles from Toolkit:
 - a) Develop partnerships in advance of a problem
 - b) Build trust with partners by demonstrating transparency in communication with them, especially in providing details on how decisions were made
 - c) Whenever possible, involve partners from within the affected community
 - d) Be prepared to explain organizational systems and processes to partners
 - e) Be prepared to interact and provide information to critics
 - f) Don't expect partnership to mean everyone communicates exactly the same thing.

Channel Map Template

- 1) The main point of this exercise is for students to recognize that each stakeholder group needs to be reached in different ways and that a different communication approach should be used based on stakeholder needs.
- 2) Highlight that duplication of message dissemination throughout different channels can increase the likelihood of your target group receiving and/or digesting the message sent. On the other hand,

students should not feel compelled to use multiple or all communication vehicles for all of their audiences. Need to reflect on what is appropriate and feasible.

- 3) Face to face communication is needed for families of victims and employees in the hospital.
- 4) High level executives need to communicate with authorities.
- 5) Students should also recognize that multiple people within the organization will be communicating about the crisis on an ongoing basis. Coordination of these communications is essential.

Module 4: Follow-up Stakeholder Communications

Purpose: In Module 4 students/participants will understand the complexities of an escalating crisis situation and will learn how to develop follow up communications for different stakeholder groups.

Material/Equipment Checklist:

- ▶ Computer and LCD projector
- ▶ Flipcharts, white boards or chalk boards one for each workgroup
- ▶ Simulation Toolkit

Step	Topic/Activity	Time	Handouts
1.	Scenario Description	10 min	Module 2 Scenario
2.	Workgroup Task: Development of key messages for assigned stakeholder group	30 min	From Toolkit: -----Message Map Template -----Developing Messages during Crises -----Channel Map Template (completed from Module 3)
3.	Debrief (workshop answers and discussion)	40 min	

Module 2 Suggested Answers/Highlights

Answers should reflect the following general principles (as in Module 2):

- Recognize and acknowledge public anger, frustration, fear, outrage or concern
- Provide three or more positive points to counter negative information or bad news
- Accept and involve the public and the media as legitimate partners
- Indicate company shares public concerns
- Convey compassion, conviction and optimism
- Gain trust by admitting that there are things you do not know.

Further, the scenario has a 9-point update. The following table provides a general guide on what to release to which audiences, as well issues to take into account.

Point #	Release: Yes/No	Audiences	Comments
1	YES	External & Internal	Important to ensure all stakeholders other buildings are safe.
2	NO		Do not mention or comment on rumor that former employee was involved. Do not speculate.) You may however state clearly that this was an isolated event and not a terrorist attack.

3	YES w revisions	Internal & External (selectively)	Full point should be released to internal audiences. External audiences should be made aware that the building is a crime scene and the company is fully cooperating with the police.
4	YES	Internal audiences only.	
5	YES	Internal & External (selectively)	Internal audiences can be exposed to all information in point 5. External audiences only need to know how to communicate with the company (alternate email, crisis website, crisis hotline, etc)
6	YES	Internal & External	Do not give details of medical conditions; just general update. Company might want to cover all of the expenses for person needed special care.
7	NO		No need at this point to address grievances. Sufficient to state that company is investigating and that employee safety is a priority.
8	YES w revisions	Internal and External	Need to address comment, not replicate it. Explain where and how customers may be served. Separate communications to agents/brokers can specifically address operational issues.
9	NO		This is already in the press. The Chairman has the right to make their own statements. Students should note though that this creates implications, as it might create the impression that the Chairman is placing blame on executives.

Module 5: Crisis Communication for Public Meetings and Press Conferences

Purpose: In Module 5 students/participants will confront the challenge of communicating sensitive and complex issues through a simulated public meeting/media news conference. Groups will engage in role---playing and be responsible for either leading a public meeting as spokespersons responding to difficult questions, or as journalists, citizens or activists predicting likely questions and potential concerns the public may have during an emergency.

Material/Equipment Checklist:

- Two separate breakout rooms or large workspaces
- 2 wireless microphones (to circulate around spokespersons and public audience)
- Table for spokespersons and several chairs for public meeting audience
- Flipcharts, white boards or chalk boards one for each workgroup
- Optional: Video recording equipment, with cable connection to computer or television
- Optional: Computer and LCD projector, television

Simulation Exercise Options: Depending on the availability of resources and technical support, this simulation exercise can be conducted using two different options:

- a) High tech option: Each breakout room is equipped with a video camera to tape the public meeting, and the main meeting room has some way of allowing the participants to view the video after the exercise as part of the review and discussion process.
- b) Low tech option: Facilitators would instruct participants to pay close attention to the other group's performance during the exercise. After the exercise, in addition to the evaluation by the instructor/facilitator, groups would be responsible for a critique of the other group in their public meeting.

Workgroup Task instructions

1. Before you begin, select a Simulation Exercise Option (eg. high or low tech) and set up the two different spaces for the public meeting as described with the appropriate equipment/materials in each room.
2. Divide the workgroups into two sections of two workgroups each.
3. Assign one workgroup the role of the Safe First team and the other the role of the audience ----- journalists, activists and citizens.
4. Instructors might want to guide the journalist/activist/citizen group to ensure they come up with difficult questions.
5. Allot 20 minutes for participants to finish the workgroup tasks.
6. After the tasks are completed, have participants take their places and begin the simulated public meeting. They may use their workgroup task sheets as a guide during this exercise.

Step	Topic/Activity	Time	Handouts
1.	Scenario Description	10 min	Module 5 Scenario
2.	Workgroup Task	20 min	From Toolkit: Media guidelines and scripts
3.	Simulated Public Meeting	30 min	
3.	Debrief (discussion and review)	20 min---Low tech option 45 min---High tech option	

Suggested Answers/Points to Highlight

The evaluation tool below may be used by instructors to assess whether students/participants were able to successfully develop messages for the public meeting that are consistent with basic crisis communication principles.

Evaluation instructions:

Mark an X under **YES**, if the participants' key messages are consistent with the message components listed below.

Do the messages and answers to questions... YES

1. Use simple, clear and use non---technical language?
2. Convey empathy for the victims and their families?
3. Show respect for views of citizens and activists?
4. Explain decision making associated with security and safety of employees and next steps in this area?
5. Address likely concerns of the three different groups?
6. Acknowledge uncertainty and potential change in approach in the future?
7. Advise public on constructive actions or measures they can take to protect themselves?
8. Let the public know about additional information sources?

Trust strengthened– Proactively addresses likely concerns by answering YES to a minimum of 5---8 questions from the above list.

Trust maintained – Proactively addresses likely concerns by answering YES to at least 3---4 questions from the above list.

Trust at risk –Failure to proactively address concerns by answering 0---2 of the questions from the above list.

Additional Note: Instructors/facilitators should also make note of spokespersons' non---verbal communication during the simulated public meeting and comment on it during the Debrief.

A Note about the Author

Dr. Theomary Karamanis is a multiple award-winning communication professor and consultant with 25 years of global experience. She is currently a full-time Senior Lecturer of Management Communication at the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business and regularly delivers executive education programs in leadership communication, crisis communication, and strategic communication. She has held several professional leadership positions, including Chair of the GCCC (Global Communication Certification Council); Chair of the IABC (International Association of Business Communicators) Academy; and Chair of the IABC Awards committee.

Her academic background includes a PhD in communication studies, a Master of Arts in mass communication, and a post-graduate certificate in telecommunications –all from Northwestern University, as well as a bachelor's degree in economics from the Athens University of Economics and Business. She also holds professional certifications as a Strategic Communication Management Professional (SCMP), online facilitator, and executive program instructor.

Dr. Karamanis has been actively engaged in various industries (private, non-profit and government) and fields of expertise, including corporate communication, media and PR, higher education administration and teaching, and consulting. She has lived and worked in Canada, Greece, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States of America.

She is the recipient of 40 professional communication awards, including 12 Platinum MarCom awards, 7 Gold Quill awards, 4 Silver Quill awards and a Comm Prix award. In 2020 she received the Award for Excellence in Communication Consulting by APCC (Association of Professional Communication Consultants) and ABC (Association for Business Communication). She is the author of several books and academic papers on communication, while she also regularly delivers presentations at international conferences and other business forums.