Crisis Communication Simulation: Toolkit

Safe First not so safe anymore? Safe 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 document is the toolkit complementing the simulation scenarios.

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Communication during an Emergency: Decision Making Tool

In deciding whether or not to release a given piece of information, the Crisis Communication Team should ask three questions.

1. Is the information needed by the target audience to mitigate risk and/or help cope with the impact of an event?

If YES -- the information should be communicated to at-risk and implicated audiences in a timely, accessible and proactive manner

If NO -- there may be no compelling rationale for communicating this information

2. Is the information relevant to decisions made by the company or about the emergency management decision-making process itself?

If YES -- this type of *risk management information* should be made available to stakeholders and the public

If NO -- there may be no compelling rationale for communicating this information

3. Is there a compelling reason to withhold or modify information, such as:

a) Could the release of the information compromise national security or an ongoing police investigation?

b) Will the release of the information violate privacy laws and/or existing confidentiality policies or unnecessarily violate personal privacy?

c) Could the release of the information result in stigmatization of individuals or clusters of people?

Note: If the answer is YES to any of the sub-questions of question 3, modifications to the information may be appropriate. If modifications are not possible, then the information may be justifiably withheld. The core imperative of informing those at-risk, however, must always take priority.

Message Map Template

When planning your communications to the public/stakeholders, use this message map template to focus and organize messages before an emergency takes place.

Message Map Template

Specific
Audience:_____

Specific Question or
Concern:_____

Key Message 1	Key Message 2	Key Message 3
Supporting Information 1-A	Supporting Information 2-A	Supporting Information 3-A
Supporting Information 1-B	Supporting Information 2-B	Supporting Information 3-B
Supporting Information 1-C	Supporting Information 2-C	Supporting Information 3-C

DEVELOPING KEY MESSAGES DURING A CRISIS

Use the key questions/concerns included below to help you prepare key messages. .

Key Question / Concern	Key points/facts to include in your messages
What is the current situation? What measures has your company taken for victims and families?	
What measures have been taken to prevent more casualties?	
What has the company done in the past to mitigate the risk of this happening?	
What is currently unknown? What is the information you are seeking now? How are you going to find out?	
Who is at risk right now? What should vulnerable publics know?	
Who is the crisis communications lead person responsible for ensuring all steps are taken?	
Is the company prepared for this crisis? Are the resources adequate?	
What immediate steps need to be taken? What will happen next?	
Is there potential public interest? Does the issue have traction? (will it become a major news item?)	
What assurances can you give to your publics at this time?	

CHANNEL MAP TEMPLATE

Use this template to identify the appropriate communications channels per target group/stakeholder. Remember 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, do not feel compelled to use multiple or all communication vehicles for all your audiences. Ask yourself what is appropriate and feasible.

Consider the following:
a) Which communication channels are appropriate for each group;
b) From whom should the communication be sent;
c) When and how often a communication should be sent;
d) Any other important information pertaining to communications channels during a crisis for the particular stakeholder group.

Communication Channels	Stakeholders/Audiences
Face to Face	
Official Letter/Memo	
Email / Fax	
Phone	
Internet/web site	
Intranet	
Mass Media (press, TV, radio)	
Social Media	
Leaflets/Brochures	
Hotline	
Cascade (word of mouth)	
Text messaging	
Other	

Emergency Communication Coordination

Partner Identification
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. 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, including government organizations and non-government organizations.

Emergency Communication Collaboration Principles
1. Develop partnerships in advance of a problem
2. Build trust with partners by demonstrating transparency in communication with them, especially in providing details on how decisions were made
3. Whenever possible, involve partners from within the affected community
4. Be prepared to explain organizational systems and processes to partners
5. Be prepared to interact and provide information to critics
6. Don't expect partnership to mean everyone communicates exactly the same thing
7. Be prepared to adapt and involve new partners during an emergency if specific communities are not being reached.

Media Guidelines and Scripts for the Crisis Communication Team

A. Emergency Crisis Communication Information Gathering Template

The following detailed information should be provided as soon as possible:

What happened?
- Nature of incident or emergency
- Location
- Time
- What is likely to happen
- Areas and facilities evacuated
- Approximate number of evacuees
- Reason for evacuation e.g. flooding, gas cloud etc

Casualties
- How many killed or injured?
- Of those injured, how serious is their condition?
- How many escaped?
- How was escape hindered?
- Were any of the victims prominent persons?
- Where were they taken
- General identification of casualties – age, sex, situation etc (do not release names and personal details; this is a police responsibility)

Property damage
- What is the estimated value of property loss?
- What structures have been damaged?
- Is any other property threatened?
- What measures have been undertaken or are being undertaken to protect property?
- Is the damage covered by insurance?
- Has this area been damaged by disasters before?

Response and relief activities
- Who discovered the emergency?
- Who summoned the alarm?
- How quickly were response units on the scene?
- What agencies responded?
- How many are engaged in the response?
- What acts of heroism occurred?
- How was the emergency kept from spreading?
- What is expected of the public/clients – is there something in particular they should do?
- What actions have been taken to protect staff safety?

Other characteristics of the emergency
- Were there any blasts or explosions?
- Collapse of structures?
- Crimes or violence?
- Attempts at escape or self-rescue?
- What was the extent of the disaster?
- The duration?
- Number of spectators?
- Crowd problems?
- Were there other unusual happenings?
- What accompanying accidents have occurred?
- What were the resulting effects (e.g. anxiety, stress) on families and survivors?

Causes
- Were there any previous indications of danger?
- Could the disaster have been prevented? How?
- Will there be: lawsuits, coroner's inquest, or criminal investigation?

When talking to the media
- Tell reporters the truth –never mislead
- Be courteous
- Don't play favorites
- Never say anything you would not want to see printed or broadcast
- Stay on top of the interview by listening to the reporter's questions
- Treat a reporter's version of what has happened objectively and with caution
- Pause, think, ask for more time if you need it
- Respond only to questions you've been asked
- Stick to the core messages as defined by the CCT
- Speak in your natural manner and tone
- Avoid jargon and slang

B. Media Conference General Guidelines and Script

- It is the responsibility of the Crisis Management Team Head to set the tone for the news conference.
- Have a predetermined message for each news conference. If you do not have a message, you do not need a news conference.
- Provide correct spellings for all names of people speaking at the conference, along with their proper titles. Also include the background of any scientific/technical spokespeople brought in.
- Set a time with the speakers prior to starting the conference. Stick to that time. Do not let any one person dominate the time during the news conference. Take charge and use the time as your authority.
- Corporate Communications staff should make themselves available at the end of the news conference, but should NOT offer any additional statements. Anything that should be said to the media should be covered during the conference.

Suggested Opening Script

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen to today's /this morning's/ tonight's news conference. Thank you all for coming.

We will be presenting information on…………

With us today is………………

We will begin with some brief statements from the _____ [list spokespeople]. Then we will open the floor to questions. Because of the ongoing operations, we will be available for ….minutes today. We will try and take as many questions as we can within the time available.

During the Q&A, ask reporters to please identify themselves (name and media house they represent). Have a stand up microphone so that they can approach and talk to it.

Guidelines Specific to Crises

The following are more specific guidelines for spokespersons talking to the media during crisis situations.

Expressing Empathy, Sympathy and Giving Directions for Action

As a spokesperson, it will be important to remember that the general public is looking for an expression of empathy (understanding) and sympathy (caring) from you. If you let your words convey a sincere understanding of what the people in your municipality are feeling, you will make a giant leap toward gaining their trust.

Examples of what to say:

- "I understand that this situation may be frightening . . ."
- "I know you are looking for answers to important questions . . ."
- "We want answers too, and we are taking steps to get them, including . . ".

- "This is a confusing time for us. It's such a horrible tragedy we face today."

Do not simply memorize words of empathy. Aim to be a compassionate leader, express your concern, and then give directions for action, as needed.

Responding to Grief

In a catastrophic event, many people might be ill, dying, or in need of treatment, and it may be your job to talk with them about what is happening. Leaders communicating directly with members of a community who are experiencing the extreme pain and grief that comes from losing loved ones must be especially aware of how grief is experienced.

Empathize with the Individuals Impacted by the Disaster and their Families

- Privacy is important; assure those involved that the information they share will be kept private.
- Try not to answer questions outside of your area of expertise; ask the individual involved to let you refer them to an expert.
- If you attempt to make physical contact with a grieving person and they tense or flinch at your touch, don't take it personally.
- Family members may voice their feelings quite strongly. Short statements of condolence, such as, "I'm so sorry," " This is a sad time," or "You're in my prayers" are enough of a response on your part.

Listen Carefully

- Place the speaker's needs above your own.
- Always be honest in your responses.
- Try not to interrupt the speaker to give him or her advice.
- Accept moments of silence.

Focus on Better Communication

- As often as possible, use the person's name in the conversation.
- Ask a clarifying question (e.g., "Can you help me understand?")
- Allow the conversation to evolve—resist the temptation to push it where you hope it will go.
- Be sensitive to the person's nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, values, and feelings.

Finally, use death or dying, not softer euphemisms. Many people feel patronized by words like expired or expressions such as received his heavenly reward. Use the same words as the grieving person might use, and you will be able to convey respect for cultural and religious differences.

C. Speaker Preparation Worksheet

Statement

_____

Key message

Key message with supporting facts

Repeat key messages

Future action/conclusion