

Communicating With Empathy in Times of Crisis

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Question

Type into the chat box if communication and/or public relations is your primary responsibility within your organization (either paid or volunteer).

For everyone else, communication is likely one of *many, many* things you do as a program director, executive director or staff member.

You Are Not Alone

If you are struggling to communicate with your stakeholders and the public right now, you are not alone. This current crisis is impacting ALL organizations, all at the same time. And we didn't have that much warning.

Communication in times of emergency is *never* easy. That's because the future is usually unclear and the outcomes of a crisis are unknown. But like any challenge that business owners and nonprofit leaders face, stepping up to the challenge is the first step to overcoming it. **Simply ignoring it by choosing not to communicate could have big implications in the long run.**

It's never too late to start. Just by making the decision to be part of this call, you are rising to the challenge, as scary as it is.

Goals of Crisis Communication

- Protect your organization's reputation
- Demonstrate leadership and accountability
- Demonstrate empathy (and remorse when appropriate)
- Demonstrate a commitment to transparency and honesty

Phases of Crisis Communication

Phase 1: Readiness

Phase 2: Response

Phase 3: Recovery

Phase 1: Readiness

Create a Crisis Communication Plan

Usually, we have very little lead time before a crisis hits.

A **crisis communication plan** helps you think through the steps you'll need to take before communicating with your audiences about a future emergency.

That way, when disaster strikes, you can spend your time executing your plan, instead of designing it from scratch.

However, if you **don't** have a crisis communication plan, here are some tips to create one as you deal with the current COVID-19 crisis.

Phase 1: Readiness

Form a Crisis Communication Team

- Who on your board has experience with communication?
- Are there faculty who teach for your program who excel at communication?
- Do you need help from a public relations professional and/or legal counsel?

Designate a spokesperson – your ED, program director or board President.

Ask for feedback – Always ask at least one person on your Crisis Communication Team to review messaging before it goes out.

Phase 1: Readiness

Draft Key Messages

Questions to Answer

What are the facts?

Who is impacted?

How are you addressing the crisis?

Phase 1: Readiness

Determine your audiences

Internal and External

Examples of internal audiences:

Staff, program participants / students, board members

Examples of external audiences:

Funders, key partners, media, graduates

Phase 1: Readiness

Draft key messages

What are the facts?

What do people **need** to know?

Right now, we're all being flooded with messaging about the current crisis, because every company and organization is being impacted. Consider this as you draft your own messaging and look for ways to distinguish yourself and share **relevant, useful information only**.

Start developing a **list of FAQs**, which will help you develop answers to important questions your audiences will have.

Phase 1: Readiness

Draft key messages

Develop a short, concise statement.

If you are affiliated with a university, it has likely provided you with some language to use about the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Example: To safeguard the health and well-being of our students, faculty, staff, and the community due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak, we have temporarily suspended all programming.

Phase 1: Readiness

Tailor key messages for audiences

What do people **want** to know?

Develop supporting statements that explain what your organization is doing to keep people safe, stay connected, fulfill its mission.

EXAMPLE of a message to students at Sacramento College:

We Are Here For You

This is a confusing and scary time. There is an over-abundance of accurate and inaccurate information available and details continue to change quickly. This webpage was established to be a hub for information, providing answers to your questions, details regarding how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) impacts your life as a student at Sacramento State. The Division of Student Affairs is committed to our vision of Where Students Come First and to helping all hornets achieve their academic and professional goals. During this time, we want to reassure all students that our commitment to serving you has not changed.

Phase 2: Response

Execute your Communication Plan

- Be timely.
- Be accurate.
- Be honest.
- Be proactive.
- Be consistent.

Phase 2: Response

Execute your Communication Plan

Every crisis is different. A global pandemic is different from a human resources issue, for instance. But the following guidelines hold true under most circumstances. Crisis communication should focus on the crisis at hand, not other issues your organization might be dealing with.

1. **Be timely.** Commit to communicating both good news and bad news in a timely way. People will start filling in the blanks if they don't hear from you.
2. **Be accurate.** Determine the facts of the crisis. In your rush to get something out, you don't want to send out inaccurate, or partially fact-checked information. Don't be afraid to say you are still working to confirm details before sharing them.
3. **Be honest.** Demonstrate a commitment to transparency and open, honest communication. Show your concern for others.
4. **Be proactive.** Show your leadership by hosting a community conversation. Provide FAQs. Provide a name and contact information where people can call if they have questions (this should be your spokesperson). Explain what steps you are taking to remedy the situation.
5. **Be consistent.** The spokesperson should always be the same person. Reiterate your organization's mission and desired outcomes, and how your organization remains committed to it. Demonstrate that the leadership team (including board members) is taking the issue seriously.

Thanks to everyone who called in for this morning's community conversation with Becky Brun, owner of Pitchfork Communications. Much to our shock, the Zoom meeting was hacked by trollers out to disrupt the meeting – and they definitely achieved their goal. This was an unsettling experience for everyone on the call.

We greatly apologize for not being better prepared. We felt it was prudent to end the call immediately rather than troubleshoot in real time and take the risk of exposing everyone to additional inappropriate content. We are taking immediate steps to make our Zoom meetings more secure and/or upgrade our Zoom account so that we can ensure all future Community Conversations, webinars and meetings are secure (read more below).

We are also working to reschedule this Community Conversation as quickly as possible – maybe as soon as tomorrow. Please watch your inbox for a new invite.

Internet trolls are always a risk, but now with more and more people running online meetings, it's something to be even more aware of. If you are planning to continue to use Zoom and other video conferencing tools, check out this [blog post](#) from Zoom about how to keep unwanted participants out of your meeting.

Covid 19 Action Page

Example:

The Alliance's response to this Community Conversation being hacked by Internet trolls.

Include only info people need to know.

Phase 3: Recovery

Once you have survived a crisis, take time to reflect.

Debrief with your communication team

- What did you do well?
- What could you improve upon?

What information do you need to share with your audiences? Is it time-sensitive?

- Instill confidence and connectedness

Q & A

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