



THE SIX STAGES OF CRISIS FOR COMMUNICATION PLANNING
STAGE FIVE: THE RESOLUTION PHASE
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The Six Stages of Crisis for Communication Planning – Stage Five: The Resolution Phase

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This brief is based on the writings of Robert C. Chandler, Ph.D.

[Learn more about Dr. Chandler here.](#)

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A crisis or disaster is an unexpected event that disrupts normal operational processes and has the potential to create significant financial, security, safety and reputational harm. Depending on the nature and severity of a crisis, the safety and well-being of people may be endangered and may present complex threats and risks. Typically, such an event is viewed as a “singularity” – it happens. Following from that premise planning, especially for crisis or disaster communication, is too often viewed as a “singular” communication plan or a static set of communication functions. My research and analysis suggests that in reality, crises and disasters have a recognizable life cycle or somewhat predictable series of “stages” through which such events progress. Each of these stages presents distinctive challenges, obstacles, needs and opportunities.

These unique aspects require recognition and adaptation if the situation is to be effectively managed. This is particularly true for overall successful communication where the advantages of strategic adaptation to the circumstances of each major stage as well as the purposes, goals, challenges and functions of communication during each stage. Communication planning can be enhanced by recognizing and segmenting planning for these particular phases. Every stage of the crisis dictates the audience's requirements, including the need for information and dictates the response of the agency providing the warning.

There are six identified phases within every crisis:

- (1) [Warning;](#)
- (2) [Risk Assessment;](#)
- (3) [Response;](#)



- (4) [Management](#);
- (5) Resolution; and
- (6) Recovery.

This is the fifth of six essays that will explore each phase of a crisis, identify specific areas of concern and provide manageable solutions.

The fifth phase of the crisis is the resolution stage. Communication best practices dictate that two-way communication should continue throughout each phase of the crisis. Communication during this phase of the crisis should include simple declarative closure measures which provide reassurance, confidence and stability. Consideration should be given to the potential communication breakdowns and confusion that can result from physical, emotional or psychological trauma.

According to the Civil Defense Museum [history site](#) since the Second World War and during the “cold war” the United States government used several sets of audible warning siren tones, which varied over the period to communicate threats to the public. The initial siren alerts used during World War II were the **Alert Signal** (a 3–5 minute steady continuous siren tone), and the **Attack Signal** (a 3–5 minute wail siren tone, or series of short tone bursts on devices incapable of wavering, such as whistles). In 1950, the [Federal Civil Defense Administration revised](#) the signals, naming the alert signal "**Red Alert**" and adding an **all-clear signal**, defined as three one-minute steady blasts, with two minutes of silence between blasts.

In a metaphorical sense, the communication functions during Stage 5, the resolution phase, are akin to the “all clear” messages of those sonic sirens. Specifically the communication plan for Stage 5 should include processes to contact all of those who have been mobilized by early communication efforts as well as all of those who are affected by the crisis to advise them that the acute crisis has been resolved and has ended.



Crisis team members should communicate resolution to all audiences in the form of ‘all clear’ alerts and a status of return ‘normalcy.’ Communication during this phase of the crisis should include simple declarative closure measures which provide reassurance, confidence and stability. Message content should also address items such as change of status from management to resolution and the process of transition to recovery that is underway. Information on anticipated recovery steps and methods to obtain resources and additional information is expected.

If the goals of communication in the previous stages have been to mobilize people for the response and management of a crisis, the inverse goal for stage 5 communication is essentially to communicate the demobilization from the crises. This may include information about ending of “emergency conditions or schedules” or releasing key personnel from contingency duties or assignments. Resolution communication might also include supplemental explanation and post-event analysis that communicates anticipated timelines, presumptive work schedules, key deadlines or changes in policies and procedures.

Continue to monitor and utilize social media platforms. Active monitoring and use of social media platforms is helpful to both provide and obtain as much information as possible in order to maintain situational awareness. Social media messages at this stage should mirror those communicated through traditional or new media channels. Embed images as often as possible. Continuing conversations using social media platforms is a proactive step to enhance crisis mitigation efforts; it is better to start a conversation than react to it. Continue to listen to what others are saying. Abandoning social media message platforms leaves organizational vulnerable to outsiders. Messages and mitigation efforts can be easily hijacked.

Planning analysis would require consideration of who should be contacted, what messages should be communicated, how should the messages be delivered and why. There is one special consideration for communication during the stage 5 resolution phase in terms of special sensitivity for messages, modality, tone and sympathetic approaches. Obviously, all crisis communication should express concern, compassion and empathy. However, the resolution phase is a vulnerable period for many people who have experienced a disaster or emergency. Disasters affect a wide range of people from different backgrounds and perspectives. The uncertainty and anxiety associated with an emergency or crisis event is compounded by the physical, psychological and emotional stresses that arise from experiences related to the incident.



Individuals experience increasing levels of physical and psychometric stress during such events. These can be categorized in tiers of increasing dysfunctional impact as stress, high stress and hyper-stress (periods of absolute boredom or hypo-stress can be dysfunctional as well). In some cases, the effect can be traumatic. In some instances, there have been acute and chronic periods of fear, anxiety or confusion during the event. Some may have experienced physical discomfort or perhaps have been injured. In some tragic circumstances, crisis survivors may have suffered due to the injuries or death of friends, loved ones and/or pets.

Much of “crisis communication” is aimed at mobilizing people to action in urgent situations with potentially dire threat risks. While it is necessary to “ramp up” the emotional and physical status in order to motivate quick and thorough behavioral responses such motivation messages due tend to leave “scars” on those who may have been the target of such attempts. The Stage 5 communication during the resolution phase comprises the carefully calculated message strategies to help “reduce” the tensions and fears among those who have been in a heightened state of arousal or readiness.

Crisis management personnel, first responders, recovery workers and those who have been affected by the stresses of the crisis may experience unique levels and types of distresses. As the crisis event comes to resolution, it is essential to carefully and appropriately communicate to them that the issue has been resolved.

Researchers have noted the following at the end of crisis events among those who have experienced such enhanced stress:

- Increased levels of emotional exhaustion
- Increased levels of anxiety and depression
- Increased levels of psychological distress
- Increased levels of distraction and inability to focus
- Increased levels of poor decision making
- Increased levels of job absenteeism
- Increased levels of refusal or inability to come to work
- Increased levels of Disaster Trauma — Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Increased levels of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder



While it is important to pay close attention to your communication and messages affecting the physical and emotional well-being of your target audience throughout the crisis lifecycle it is especially imperative to do so during the resolution phase as many people will begin a transition back to “normalcy” as the acute phase of the crisis events draws to a close.

Conclusion

Stage 5 communication needs center on the resolution of the crisis. You should have a plan and procedures to contact all audiences with the ‘all clear’ message and a status of return ‘normalcy’. Communication during this phase of the crisis should include simple declarative closure measures that provide reassurance, confidence, and stability. Planning analysis would require consideration of who should be contacted, what messages should be communicated, how should the messages be delivered and why. Preparedness can be measured by your readiness to get in touch with the right people at this time with the right message framed in the right way(s).

It is important to consider the impact of emotional, psychological and physical trauma on communication effectiveness during stage 5. After a traumatic event or crisis situation, consideration should be given to the emotional, cognitive and physical well-being of those affected. Organizations and agencies should be prepared to address the residual psychological and cognitive issues resulting from the crisis for community members as well as those that provided the emergency response. Inevitably, there will be lingering confusion, misinformation “pockets” and sequential communication delays and breakdowns, all of which will negatively affect resolution efforts.

To help facilitate crisis and emergency communication planning for the resolution stage I typically run interactive sessions with the key communication planning team members where we review the needs, challenges, audiences, sources of information, optimal channels, and develop a road map to help ensure highly effective communication during this stage of the next crisis. This process can assist any team or management group to enhance their crisis communication preparedness

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