THE SIX STAGES OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLANNING
STAGE THREE: THE INCIDENT RESPONSE PHASE
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The Six Stages of Crisis for Communication Planning –
Stage Three: The Incident Response Phase

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

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Please contact Firestorm to schedule a conversation or exercise with Dr. Chandler to enhance your organization's crisis communication preparedness.

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) Incident Response;

(4) Management;
(5) Resolution; and
(6) Recovery.

This is the third of six essays that will explore each phase of a crisis, identify specific areas of concern and provide manageable solutions. [Download briefs](#) of the previous topics or [watch recordings of session presentations.](#)

The third phase is the incident response phase. The first three stages of a crisis may not always occur in sequence. In some cases there is no advance warning. In many instances, the need to react/respond and communicate must proceed simultaneously with the process of assessing risk and determining the response. In fact, the responding communication and managing the crisis communication stages may themselves need to be implemented even while risk assessment communication or eventually resolution communication and recovery communication stages come on-line. The value of viewing these as stages is not that these are an inherent and necessary absolute sequence (although it does generally follow the life cycle of an emerging crisis or disaster) but rather that these "stages" require communication preparation and accomplishment for the unique goals, needs, objectives, target audiences, messages and challenges which each presents. In most of these stages it is likely that the communication processes would need to run concurrently and at the same times as other processes.

Communication planning best practices dictates that the incident response phase communication begins the moment when an incident occurs and activation incident notification is issued to initiate reaction to the emergency. An incident, of whatever type and category occurs. There may or may not have been advance warning and/or assessment of the incident. Regardless of whether things are already in motion or if the incident occurs suddenly and unexpectedly there is an urgent and immediate need for a series of specific communication tasks at this critical moment. In most cases, the emergency response plan is activated. Key personal and tasks need to be coordinated and monitored. Inbound information needs to be processed and used in subsequent communication interactions as well as the basis for outbound messages. These tasks require an extensive set of communication procedures, messages, active channels and modalities and well-prepared personnel. If an incident occurs without any advance warning, it may be that the second stage of risk assessment communication is also initiated at the same time and that process may need to run concurrently with the third stage communication processes. Crisis team members call first responders into action and you begin to notify the public about the incident. Wider scale use of automated incident notification is a commonly used tool in the Stage 3 communication. Emergency or incident notification would include alerting first responders, those in harm's way and other key constituents. There are various types and levels of target audiences who may need to be alerted (warned) depending on the nature, size, scope and category of the incident. Using these tools effectively requires a priori planning and preparation.

The response phase requires notifications to activate and coordinate emergency response activities. The level of notification is determined by the scope, size, and type of emergency. In some circumstances one of the most important notices to be disseminated is to actually communicate a ''declaration of an emergency'' or ''activate the emergency response plan.'' Specific types of notification messages in the response stage typically include the following: disseminating warnings, emergency information, and action instructions; requesting information to survey and evaluate the situation, directing first responders and reactive steps, positioning personnel and equipment for the response; alerting and activating the Emergency Operations Center personnel; reinforcing established guidelines, issuing instructions for evacuation, sheltering in place, or other behavioral responses.

Communication is necessary to ensure that the emergency response plan is activated. Crisis team

members call first responders into action and notification of the public about the incident begins. Emergency notification would include alerting first responders, those in harm's way, and other key constituents. The response phase begins at the moment when an incident occurs and activation notification is issued to initiate reaction to the emergency. In a sense, the Incident Response phase is the "golden minute" to "golden hour" period where you must response promptly, accurately and effectively in order to correct, contain or mitigate the risks of the situation. Connecting with the right people at the right time with the right message in the right way for the right reason is essential. Communication needs include essential interaction with the crisis team, first responders, people at risk, key personnel and executives, local law enforcement and other responding agencies, and citizens, students, and employees. Focus of your communication may be geared toward making audiences aware of the incident, providing instructions, and seeking confirmation of a response.

If an emergency occurs without a warning phase, activate the response as rapidly as conditions permit. Instructions will need to reach all audiences swiftly and be understandable. For example, evacuations will need to be conducted and/or rescue operations as required or issued by emergency information and instructions. There are specific tools, templates, techniques and principles for more effective emergency incident notification messages. It is important to thoroughly prepare and plan for these. Furthermore, it is extremely useful to map your messages out in advance and have key message points at the ready for quick deployment or adaptation. There are a number of these rules, principles, and techniques that are collectively referred to as "the Chandler method" for emergency incident notification. These include the 3-3-30 rule, the 60 & 6 principle, the DA4 model as well as message maps and message maps 2.0. A lot of this communication should be scripted out well in advance of the incident. A number of automatic scripts and checklists should be in place. I recommend training and preparation for following these helpful guidelines as you build your crisis communication plan for Stage 3 of the crisis.

Also, remember that there will be an on-going need for inbound information during the incident response phase as well as throughout the subsequent stages of the crisis. Your plan should include the key mechanisms for gathering information and situational intelligence. For example, how will you receive field reports (from who, how, when, etc.). You should plan for on-going social media monitoring

and updating (this activity will expand during the Stage 4 of the crisis). Do not overlook monitoring the traditional media. In the next stage of the crisis, these tools and plans will help you with rumor and misinformation control as well as keeping your overall communication messaging consistent and proactive. The key types of communicating for coordinating and managing the early initial stages of crisis management should be a major part of your crisis communication plan. Often you may need to communicate even before your command center is fully up and operational. Is your plan and procedures capable of doing so? There also should be a clear chain of command and empowered employees to issue directives and dispatch initial response. These communication processes and procedures should be vetted in advance and explicitly included in your communication plan.

Communication in this stage of a crisis is often centered on use of tools such as automated or mass notification systems and incident notification protocols. However, thorough communication planning requires a cross section of different types of communication goals and methods. It is essential to conduct a communication needs audit for the Stage 3 of a crisis unique to your organization and situation. This means that you have to conduct an exhaustive anticipatory analysis to determine who, what, how, when, and why you will need to communicate when an emergency incident occurs and to meet the demands of the response. My recommendation is that you organize your Stage 3 communication planning based on common hazards and categories of incidents. For example, perhaps start with incidents that would require an evacuation of a building or facility. How would you communicate to coordinate an evacuation? In addition to sounding alarms, what other messages would you send, to whom, how and in what sequence? How would you receive and process critical information from various sources (e.g. fire sensors, floor wardens, operations, emergency responders, etc.)? How would you seek and receive information from evacuees who are safely at their assembly point or those who were not at the office that day and are therefore not at the designated assembly point for roll call? How can you adjust your messages quickly and accurately? For example, if a "default" evacuation path is blocked by file or hazmat spill – can you successful communicate to the right people at the right time what the right detour route should be to keep them out of harm's way?

Systematically review all of the processes and procedures, which depend on effective communication and coordination to ensure a prompt and complete response to the incident. For each of these, consider steps you can take now to ensure that you can effectively communicate then. Do not overlook the importance of multiple modalities and two-way communication to meet both you and your target audiences information needs. Ask questions about tools and technology – and be prepared for systemic failures (i.e. cell tower failures) with back-up plans and redundant procedures. What, if any, is the role for push and pull communication channels (broadcast messages vs. website updates)? Periodically review and update your communication plans. This should include your database information, key contacts, and procedures to adapt to changing requirements and realities. Further, there are many opportunities for training and education to ensure that all of your key personnel are fully prepared and ready to both listen and respond – as well as provide effective feedback during this critical phase.

The response phase requires communication to initiate the activities that are taken during and immediately following a disaster. Effective communication demonstrates your leadership role and professionalism. It also facilitates coordination efforts between local, county, state, and federal agencies. During the response phase, emphasis is placed on quick action, containing the incident, gaining control, protecting people and property, and minimizing the effects of the emergency. All communication that requires the activation of immediate response actions occurs during the response phase should be covered in your communication plan for Stage 3 of the crisis.

Key Factors

Category	Description
Context, rapidly changing events	''facts'' with low confidence, misinterpretation (receiver orientation) issues, psychological interference (noise), and people and technology breakdowns;
The best ways to communicate	decisively, quickly, calmly, directly, exhibiting a richer vs. leaner mentality, avoiding redundancy, exhibiting command, control, and coordination communication, and maintaining directive
Emphasis	on push communication flow
What to communicate?	Power-worded messages, in a manner that provides concise, precise, literal, behavioral directions and meta-message factors.
Meta-messages	(Literally means messages about messages) includes all of the ''implied'' levels of meanings or interpretations (tone, urgency, etc.)

After the initial response activation during the response phase, there is a transition to communication for the ongoing management of the emergency rather than immediate responses. Those aspects of your communication plan are addressed in the discussion of communication planning for Stage 4 of the crisis.

To help facilitate crisis and emergency communication planning for the incident response 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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