

# Crisis communication models: Smooth crisis situations with systematic response mechanisms

By James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA

The heart and soul of a successful crisis response is a process that can be activated immediately and continues building until the situation either reaches some level of control or the momentum of the crisis has abated. Then, established corporate functions can be imposed and business activity recovery can take place. Practically speaking, crisis planning takes months, while execution of the crisis response must take place in only a few minutes to a few hours.

## Response-triggering approaches

Using current best practices as our guide, there are five triggering strategies for corporate crisis response. Company executives should select the activation approach that best parallels corporate culture, organization, reporting structures and likely crisis scenarios. It is possible for an organization to have more than one triggering mechanism because the choice of response mechanism is scenario dependent:

1. Corporate Emergency Response Team (CERT)
2. Corporate Crisis Communication Response Officer (CCCRO)
3. Incident Command Model
4. Special Response Unit (Crisis Action Response Group)
5. The help desk and one-call help line

### 1. Corporate Emergency Response Team

CERT, which includes the CEO or his or her representatives, has the sole authority to declare an emergency. It activates the appropriate Incident-Specific

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This teleseminar provides 0.5 Maintenance Credit toward the minimum of 10 credits required to maintain your APR. Please contact Kathy Mulvihill at PRSA, (212) 460-1436 or [kathy.mulvihill@prsa.org](mailto:kathy.mulvihill@prsa.org).

Response Team (ISRT) or teams at headquarters following its declaration and continues to manage the problem and apply institutional resources to its resolution, including activating additional ISRTs when necessary. The CERT is composed of representatives from senior management, public affairs, legal and other key departments responsible for managing the crisis.

The CERT is responsible for:

- Declaring the emergency.
- Determining the level of headquarters involvement.
- Creating and activating ISRTs to handle various aspects of a crisis.
- Reporting to and involving senior management in response to crises.
- Approving the strategic approach for handling crises.
- Approving quickly the drafts of news releases, statements and related materials for use during a crisis.
- Pre-authorizing actions and statements to reduce delays.
- Allocating and applying resources and corporate assets.

### 2. Corporate Crisis Communication Response Officer

The Corporate Crisis Communication Response Officer — a position that usually reports to the chairman — has the sole responsibility to declare emergencies, direct corporate resources and mobilize ISRTs. The CCCRO and ISRTs together determine whether to handle the matter themselves or mobilize additional resources.

CCCRO duties rotate monthly to a senior executive on call 24 hours a day. This executive will be relieved of travel responsibilities during the duty month. A second senior executive will be named as backup.

The CCCRO has four options:

1. Activate or not activate an emergency response.
2. Involve senior officers.
3. Activate one or more ISRTs.
4. Let local CERTs handle the matter.

If a crisis response is activated, the CCCRO contacts senior officers, notifies Crisis Communications Command Center staff, calls on standby resources, activates appropriate ISRTs, notifies subject matter experts, assigns senior management involvement and usually activates the Crisis Communications Command Center (CCCC).

The CCCRO is responsible for:

- Declaring the emergency.
- Creating and activating ISRTs.

• Contacting appropriate senior officers.

- Notifying Crisis Communications Command Center members.
- Notifying standby resources.
- Notifying subject matter experts.
- Assigning senior management involvement.
- Activating Crisis Communications Command Centers.

The two principal reasons for selecting this approach are the CCCRO's role in pre-authorization of appropriate emergency response steps and the CCCRO's power to break through any bureaucratic barriers and clear the way for immediate action.

### 3. Incident Command Model

Sept. 11, 2001 gave large organizations new reasons to consider the Incident Command Approach as a model for managing serious incidents. This model is a simple but dynamic structure that has the benefit of tying all elements of organizational management into the response process, while putting specialists in place for various circumstances under the command of a competent individual from senior management.

An incident command structure has three principal elements:

- An overall Incident Commander (IC), usually someone trained in this activity, is appointed, selected or hired. Often the IC is someone from senior management with knowledge of a particular problem or situation facing the organization.
- A scenario-based command structure is established with key individuals in charge of each facet of the incident response: disaster recovery, business resumption and communications aspects.
- A permanent command center is set up as a central reception area into which all information can flow and from which all orders for activities are studied, strategized, approved and then executed.

### 4. Special Response Unit or Crisis Action Response Group

The Special Response Unit is a special group of trained individuals functioning across the entire organization. When a situation is identified, no matter who recognizes it as a potential crisis, or where the situation is occurring, this group is notified, activated and establishes its own agenda for response.

Attributes of the special response unit include:

- An organized team of individuals

having autonomy for decision-making and access to resources when activated.

- Its own outside consultants usually on retainer, ready to be activated to provide help as needed.

- The power to make decisions, expend substantial resources and affect operations of the organization — at least temporarily — to mitigate or mediate the problems caused by the crisis.

- Almost always used in specific scenarios regardless of other triggering mechanisms in place, employee violence scenarios or law enforcement activity scenarios.

### 5. The help desk and one-call help line

Of the five activation systems, the help desk — a telephone help line approach — is the simplest and most direct. Prompt responses are triggered without fear or favor and without any thought about reputational or marketplace ramifications.

The two primary benefits of this approach are that relatively low-level people trigger responses and notify key people so that problems can be dealt with promptly, and that the notification process begins automatically.

Help desks are usually installed through the corporate security department. These are single telephone number access points where anyone — employee, customer, manager, neighbor — can call to get information, report problems, provide information or seek help. The individual at the help desk, which is staffed around the clock, has a cataloged index of topics at his or her disposal. When someone reports an incident or situation, the help desk can trigger an emergency response by looking up the situation and following whatever pre-authorized directions are in the help desk issue inventory.

The help desk is also designed to provide answers and ask questions early in the notification process. This routes problems and situations more quickly to appropriate resources so that less time elapses before assistance is delivered. In many cases, this can swiftly reduce a crisis to an identifiable and manageable problem. **T**

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