

THE CRISIS RESPONSE TEMPLATE:

GETTING MANAGEMENT ON BOARD IN THE CRISIS PLANNING PROCESS

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of preparation for crisis communication is achieving significant management involvement at the beginning of the process and to an appropriate degree throughout the preparation effort.

A major difficulty in maintaining management attention is the volume of material and information that crisis preparation tends to produce. There are manuals, schematics, and handbooks for nearly every aspect of response execution, not to mention the information on disaster and crisis situations, and business recovery and continuation. When you consider that managers are virtually never measured on their response capability, readiness, or performance in these areas, you can understand why managers look attentive but often are thinking about something else during their crisis response briefing sessions.

An interesting technique we now recommend is the use of templates. Brevity and clarity are the hallmarks of this approach.

Templates are diagrams, basically flowcharts, that give management crucial information that forms the basis for important discussions as plan development proceeds, or execution occurs. This approach also teaches significant detail about the intricacies and requirements of an effective response.

This is a big picture approach that will help achieve significant crisis readiness goals: pre-authorization, surprise reduction, internal and external communication, and response consistency. This approach easily orients new players to the process should those originally involved be unavailable, inaccessible, or fail to survive.

This approach can go a long way toward counteracting the failure patterns so often seen in organizations where readiness has a low priority or is over-estimated.

Some of the more common failure patterns include:

- **Mismanaging the victim dimension:** It is the treatment of victims that maintains or destroys trust and reputation.
- **Failing to involve the boss:** For any crisis response to succeed, the boss or someone the boss trusts must be involved from the very beginning of the planning process.
- **The presumption of readiness:** A 2003 study by Guardsmark, a security consulting firm, estimated that 75 percent of American businesses are significantly under prepared for a crisis or serious emergency.
- **Over generalized planning:** Crisis prevention and response require scenario-based approaches – picking specific potential problems and working them through using an approach like the templates illustrated in this article.
- **Failing to recognize that crises are truly different:** Failure occurs when serious problems are treated as “normal course of business” without the prompt, empathetic, urgent, and relentless effort that is required to reduce crises and continue operations.

Each of the two template examples described here potentially replaces a manual, while actually accelerating learning and attracting management engagement.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James E. Lukaszewski (loo-ka-SHEV-skee) advises, coaches, and counsels the men and women who run very large corporations and organizations. He is an expert in managing and counteracting tough, touchy, sensitive corporate communications issues. The fastest growing portion of his practice involves civil and criminal litigation. He is one of the few who can and truly does coach CEOs.

He is a prolific author (several books, hundreds of articles), lecturer (corporate, college and university), coach, and counselor. He is quoted in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Miami Herald*, the *Harvard Business Review*, and industry trade journals. He is a columnist, advisor, or editor for almost every major public relations periodical. His 1992 book, *Influencing Public Attitudes: Strategies that Reduce the Media's Power*, remains a classic work in the field of direct communication. He is an internationally recognized speaker on crisis management, ethics, media relations, public affairs, and reputation preservation and restoration. Visiting his Web site, www.e911.com, is like attending the University of Crisis Management.

An accredited member of the International Association of Business Communicators (ABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (APR), Mr. Lukaszewski is a member of the PRSA's College of Fellows (Fellow PRSA) and Board of Ethics & Professional Standards. He served as a crisis communications advisor to the International Disaster Advisory Committee, Agency for International Development, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance from 1989 to 1992, and is a civilian advisor to several other federal agencies. He lectures annually at the U.S. Marine Corp's East Coast Commander's Media Training Symposium and was the second recipient of its Drew Middleton Award. He is the recipient of both Ball State University's 2004 National Public Relations Achievement Award and the 2004 Patrick Jackson Award for Distinguished Service to PRSA, and is among the winners of the 2005 *PR News* Lifetime Achievement Award. His name appeared in *Corporate Legal Times* as one of "28 Experts to Call When All Hell Breaks Loose," and in *PR Week* as one of 22 "crunch-time counselors who should be on the speed dial in a crisis."