



RECOVERY HOUSING BEST PRACTICES

HOW TO COMMUNICATE IN A CRISIS

HELPFUL TIPS FROM THE FLETCHER GROUP - RCORP RURAL
CENTER OF EXCELLENCE IN SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER RECOVERY

IT'S WISE TO PLAN AHEAD

Running an organization, facility, or program is not all smooth sailing for any business, including those that work across the Substance Use Disorder (SUD) recovery industry. Crises are inevitable and the only way to ensure a positive outcome is to be prepared.

Examples of a crisis where a communication plan will be helpful may range from NIMBY topics, a fire or other emergency at a recovery house, or a letter to the editor about an SUD topic that creates misinformation in a community. Formulating a detailed plan in advance for handling crises will help your team quickly answer critical questions such as:

- Who will speak on behalf of your organization?
- Who will issue an official statement?
- Who will oversee the creation and execution of a communication plan that includes guidance for staff, clients, and residents?

For more information, or if you would like additional SUD recovery related resources, please contact the Fletcher Group at 606-657-4662 or at www.fletchergroup.org/contact/.

WHAT IS A CRISIS?

Crises vary widely depending on the organization, the location, and the incident itself

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Based on the breadth and depth of our hands-on experience and research, the Fletcher Group is confident in endorsing the following recommendations as being best practices.

Lesson 1: Form a Crisis Response Team

A crisis response team coordinates an organization's reaction and response to a crisis. The composition of the crisis response team will vary based on the size of the organization, the nature of the products or services it provides, the types of crises that are likely to impact the organization, and its prior experience responding to crisis situations.

In a larger organization with a more complex staffing pattern, the crisis response team may include multiple key department heads plus the Chief Executive Officer. In a smaller organization with few staff members, the crisis response team may be comprised of board members, a couple of staff, and outside professional advisors (who may either be paid or volunteers).

Lesson 2: Have a Plan

There are three stages of crisis management: (1) Pre-Crisis; (2) Crisis Response; and (3) Post-Crisis. Each of these have specific implications for developing and carrying out a crisis response.



PRE-CRISIS: Develop and practice ways to respond to various crisis scenarios.

- Identify risks and plan for ways to minimize those risks
- Define the short-term message based on the crisis
- Ensure your messaging and language are stigma-free
- Establish monitoring or early warning systems
- Develop a crisis response plan
- Identify who will act as a crisis manager

CRISIS RESPONSE: Execute the organization's crisis response plan.

- Convene the crisis response team
- Crisis manager communicates with employees and the public

POST-CRISIS: Review, adjust, and update response plan for the future.

- Crisis manager continues to meet with crisis response team
- Review crisis response plan to evaluate and revise if needed

A STEP-BY-STEP CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

1. Gather the CEO, legal counsel, and communications support staff
2. Contact and work with law enforcement
3. Inform the Board of Directors
4. Prepare and distribute media statements
5. Connect with staff and volunteers

Crisis Management Plan Checklist

- Does your plan reflect your organization's mission and values?
- Do you have measures to identify crisis warning signs?
- Do you have contact information for all members of the crisis response team, key advisors, stakeholders, and support services?
- Do your crisis scenarios represent a range of the most probable emergencies for your organization?
- Have you identified crisis core response action elements?
- Have you mapped the response actions to the crisis scenarios?
- Have you planned for crisis communication?
- Is there a clear chain of command in the crisis response team?
- Have you established a signal to communicate when a crisis has occurred and when the situation is all clear?
- Does your crisis plan include procedures for assessing the severity of an event and its impact?
- Have you included the training and plans that you need to update?
- Have you identified and set up a command center?
- Have you identified and obtained all necessary back-up resources?



The Six R's of Crisis Management

1. **Recognize:** Recognize and identify the issue. Mobilize the crisis response team. Have contact info available.
2. **Remove:** Provide tools for experts to use to eradicate (remove) the issue. Communicate with key audiences. Monitor and evaluate reactions by keeping an eye on social media and news outlets.
3. **Restrict:** Conduct a restricted crisis response team call or meeting. If necessary, post a holding statement until a full statement is prepared. Communicate to critical audiences.
4. **Recover:** Implement business recovery plan. Draft a resolution statement.
5. **Resolve:** Alert audiences that the issue has been addressed. Follow up with affected parties.
6. **Refine:** Evaluate effectiveness of the crisis response team and response tactics. Update contact lists. Re-train the crisis response team as needed.

Lesson 3: Choose the Right Spokesperson

An effective spokesperson has verbal and non-verbal communication skills, media literacy, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and crisis awareness. Spokespeople are adept at public speaking, media relations, crisis management, and possess subject matter expertise. Their credibility is affected by their role and authority, availability and accessibility, reputation, and rapport with the audience.

How to Prepare a Spokesperson

Before a crisis situation, the prepared spokesperson will research and anticipate potential crises, develop and update key messages and talking points, practice and rehearse media interviews and public statements, and establish and maintain media contacts and networks.

During a crisis situation, the spokesperson will monitor and assess the situation, update and adapt key messages and talking points, deliver clear, concise, and consistent information, and respond to media and public inquiries and feedback.

After a crisis situation, a spokesperson's duties include evaluating and reviewing the communication performance, addressing any gaps or errors, and following up and maintaining communication with the media and the public.

Spokespersons shall show empathy and compassion, acknowledge the impact and emotions of the crisis, express concern and care, offer support and assistance, highlight positive actions and outcomes, and call for cooperation and collaboration.



How to Deal with Challenges When Communicating in a Crisis Situation

During a crisis situation, it is not uncommon to encounter hostile or aggressive media. These encounters can result in negative or biased coverage, release of misinformation or disinformation, rumors or speculation, or public anger or distrust.

Effectively responding to such situations begins with being prepared and proactive. Instead of ignoring or avoiding such challenges, address them directly and respectfully while correcting inaccuracies or falsehoods.

In the spirit of collaboration, the spokesperson can provide the media with alternative or additional information, explain the reasons or context, acknowledge the limitations or uncertainties and emphasize shared communication goals.

Lesson 4: Be Present

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

- First do no harm. Your words have consequences; be sure they are the right ones and they are stigma-free
- Don't babble. Know what you want to say. Say it...then say it again if necessary.
- If you don't know what you're talking about, stop talking.
- Focus more on informing people than impressing them. Use everyday language.
- Never say anything you are not willing to see printed on tomorrow's front page.
- Never lie. You won't get away with it.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Don't get angry. When you argue with the media, you always lose ... and lose publicly.
- Don't speculate, guess, or assume. When you don't know something, say so.



Avoid Saying “No Comment”

Responding with “no comment” may lead to speculation and even an assumption of guilt. Once the crisis has been addressed with the Crisis Response Team, and if further investigations are still pending, issue a minimal statement addressing major concerns related to the crisis.

Prepare and Practice

Consider how to answer questions in general and how to respond to specific inquiries.

Prepare some general responses about your organization, its mission, and the importance of your work.

Develop generic responses that can be modified easily.

Routinely practice, prepare, and review your speaking points.

Lesson 5: Respond Quickly

THE THREE A'S OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Accept

Don't be in a state of denial. It doesn't help the situation to act as though it doesn't exist. Own the crisis not because you necessarily caused it (depending on the situation), but because accepting the situation will expedite the process of confronting it.

Acknowledge

Key audiences – both internal and external – will eagerly await to hear from the organization's leadership during a crisis. They want to know what you know. It is always acceptable to be transparent in admitting that you may not have all the details during the initial phase of a crisis. Public acknowledgement can calm fears and decrease anxiety.

Affirm

It's not always easy to simply state a solution or identify a path toward a swift crisis resolution. However, words of affirmation can be a strong tower in garnering confidence and credibility during times of uncertainty. Always be careful not to over-promise in the zest to affirm. Saying what one plans to do and promising a certain outcome are two very different things.



Lesson 6: Be Compassionate

Fear of lawsuits often causes companies to resort to parsed legal language or circumspection. While minimizing liability is important, showing a human side goes a long way toward winning goodwill and defusing anger--often a motivating factor in lawsuits.

Lesson 7: Speak the Truth

Be upfront and transparent, and don't hide behind euphemisms or jargon. The truth will eventually become clear and blurring it will only cause further mistrust and resentment.

Authenticity requires that organizations stand ready to act quickly, decisively, and calmly when sharing crisis related information. Providing transparent, timely information helps establish trust with interested parties so they can make decisions in their own best interests.

Lesson 8: Focus and Move Ahead

Whenever possible, align crisis response actions with the long-term vision and overarching goals of the organization. By systematically integrating long-term vision and overarching goals into every aspect of crisis management, organizations can ensure that their immediate actions not only address the crisis effectively but also contribute to the sustained achievement of strategic objectives.

After a crisis, conduct a thorough evaluation of the response to identify strengths and weaknesses in alignment with long-term goals. Adjust crisis management plans based on lessons learned to better integrate long-term objectives in future responses.



Lesson 9: Communicate Clearly

Present information openly and in a way that others can understand. Recognize that personal perspectives influence how individuals interpret information. Don't try to hide from bad news.

Sometimes it will be appropriate to issue an apology. Understanding how to frame an apology can define the future of your organization. Here are some tips for apologizing:

- Clearly outline what changes will be made to ensure the crisis doesn't happen again. Point the audience toward new policies that will be instituted moving forward.
- Take Responsibility. Don't point fingers or sidestep the issue. Conveying that you understand and care more about the damage done to others, instead of your brand's reputation, is critical.
- Respond Quickly and Thoughtfully. Don't let the news cycle speak for you. Be the first to offer a thoughtful, sincere, and non-defensive apology.
- Don't Lie. Be as transparent as possible when addressing the issue. Lying or misleading the public will create distrust and diminish credibility. Even in a crisis, client privacy and confidentiality is important and you can reference the related regulations.
- Learn From Others. Look to industry leaders who have successfully navigated a public apology.

By following the guidance presented in this toolkit, and depicted in the following figure, organizations can effectively manage crises and minimize their impact on operations, reputation, and stakeholders.



Use of Social Media in Crisis Communications

Social media has enabled users to spread negative or embarrassing information about a brand or an individual in a nanosecond. Companies need to monitor social media actively and act quickly to address public relations problems. Unflattering episodes can go viral, severely damaging a company's reputation.

Almost all nonprofits use some level of social media. Decide now who will manage social media during an emergency.

There is little chance of controlling information on social media. No matter how hard you try to plug information leaks, they will happen. To counteract erroneous information, provide accurate and useful information. Fight rumors with fact.

Streamline your approach to social media. Plan how to respond to questions, comments, or complaints that appear on your social media sites.

Make sure to continually monitor and respond to questions and comments posted on the organization's social media sites. That way, you can respond to incorrect information and build credibility with your followers.

Social media may be the best way to show the human face of your organization and shore up its reputation for being kind, sympathetic, polite, accurate, and a source of unbiased information. Suggestions for using social media in crisis communications are depicted in the following figure.



Crisis Management Example

Serenity Recovery House* was reminded that crises can present in various forms. Serenity House's founders knew that some of the worst situations the house could face were the death of a resident, destruction of the house, or other catastrophes involving the house or its residents. Never had they considered that a minor conflict between two residents, could escalate into a crisis that threatened the continued existence of their recovery house.

Serenity House had worked diligently to confront opposition resulting from stigma and NIMBY when it chose its location nearly three years before. Neighbors were fearful and opposed the house being in their neighborhood. They didn't accept that 8 men who were recovering from substance use disorders, some with minor criminal backgrounds, wouldn't present a threat to them, and to their way of life on the quiet residential street

Despite neighbors' initial opposition, Serenity House eventually won their support and moved forward with leasing the home. For two years, the residents proved that a recovery house could be a good neighbor. They maintained the property, observed noise levels, and shared vegetables from their backyard garden. Serenity House became an accepted part of the neighborhood. Then that acceptance quickly, and without warning changed.

On a summer evening when neighbors were working in their yards and children were playing outside, two Serenity residents got into a verbal conflict that quickly escalated into shouting and name calling. Some profanity was used in a confrontation that the men couldn't really explain. The neighbors were alarmed and called the police after rushing their children inside.

Although no arrests were made, damage had been done to the house and its reputation. The neighbors' initial fears and resentment had returned. All within minutes. The house's owner said that unless the neighbors settled down, the house's lease would not be renewed.

Serenti House called a public meeting and offered an apology for the disturbance. Although the two residents who were involved in the conflict would be permitted to remain in the home, they had been put on notice that no further disturbances would be permitted. They were referred to anger management and communication classes. Serenity House further established a new policy that other than when performing yard work that its residents would not use the front yard – leaving the street free for children's activities.

Although the neighbors reluctantly agreed to give the Serenity House another chance, its leaders recognized that in just a few minutes their home had lost much of the good neighbor reputation that it had strived to earn. However, by following its crisis communication plan in honestly addressing the matter with the neighbors, not minimizing their reactions, and putting a plan in place to regain their trust, the home was able to continue to exist.