

Crisis communication essentials

Proactive planning for the unpredictable



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About Formation PR & Brand

Formation PR & Brand is a strategic communications agency for mission-driven organizations.

We help our clients navigate moments that matter and we do it with sector depth and fluency.

**Strategic
communications**

**Branding and
creative design**

Public relations

**Marketing
campaigns**

Today's working session

By the end of this session, you will:

- 01 Examine how your organization appears in search and AI
- 02 Identify your most significant vulnerabilities
- 03 Assess your current crisis readiness
- 04 Practice making decisions under pressure
- 05 Leave with a crisis checklist and 30-day priority

What makes something a communications crisis?

Issue, emergency or crisis?

01

Issue

A concern the organization can address through normal operations

02

Emergency

A situation requiring immediate action to protect people, services or infrastructure

03

Crisis

A situation that threatens the organization's credibility, authority or ability to operate

What creates a communications crisis?

A situation becomes a communications crisis when it:

Threatens people, operations or public trust

Creates urgent demands for information

Involves conflicting facts, interests or responsibilities

Exposes gaps in leadership or coordination

Allows confusion or misinformation to shape the response

RDO risk travels across boundaries

A crisis may originate with:

The RDO itself

A program or service

A member government

A board member or employee

A vendor or community partner

A project for which the RDO serves as
fiscal agent

What are your crisis risks?



Table discussion

What risks could test your organization's credibility?

01

What could happen?

02

Who would be affected?

03

Who would expect answers from you?

04

What would make the situation difficult to manage?

What do you do about it?

Crisis communication depends on decisions

Every response must answer:

Who leads?

What happened?

What can we confirm?

What action will the organization take?

Who needs to hear from us?

When will we communicate again?

A crisis plan defines how people will work together. The messages follow the decisions.

Crisis communications response process

01 Recognize

Identify the potential crisis and raise the flag

02 Activate

Bring together the right decision-makers

03 Verify

Establish what is known and what remains uncertain

04 Decide

Determine what the organization will do

05 Communicate

Reach priority audiences with verified information

06 Monitor

Track new facts, questions and public response

Who owns the crisis response?

Incident lead

Activates the team, sets priorities and directs the overall response

Operational or subject-matter lead

Verifies facts and explains operational implications

Communications lead

Recommends the communications strategy, audiences and update cadence

Authorization authority

Provides final authorization to release the communication

Spokesperson

Delivers public statements and media responses

Board and partner liaison

Coordinates information with governing bodies and external partners

Recorder

Documents decisions, approvals, facts and updates

Your public information environment

Your public information environment

During a crisis, where do people seek information?



Landscape analysis

Where are our vulnerabilities?

Using Google Search, plug in this prompt:

PROMPT

What are the public perception vulnerabilities for [insert organization name]?

Landscape analysis

Where are our vulnerabilities?

Using ChatGPT, plug in this prompt:

PROMPT

What are the public perception vulnerabilities for [insert organization name]?

Landscape analysis

Compare the Google Search results with the ChatGPT answer:

01

What was accurate?

02

**What was outdated
or incorrect?**

03

What was missing?

04

**Which sources shaped the
answer?**

05

**What could create confusion
during a crisis?**

Landscape analysis debrief

Reflect on your search and AI findings with your table:

01

What surprised you most about the results?

02

Did search and AI present the same picture?

03

Which sources appeared to carry the most influence?

04

Could someone distinguish your RDO from programs & member governments?

05

What information would you want people to find more easily during a crisis?

SCAN ME



Interactive Activity

Scan to submit responses

Three things to do now

01

Audit your digital footprint

Search your organization, programs, and leadership across search and AI tools.

02

Strengthen your sources

Keep owned channels updated (website, social media) and build credible third-party coverage (PR, thought leadership).

03

Define your narrative

Clarify your audience and core messages before a crisis hits.

AI changes how people find you, but **trust** determines what they believe.

Crisis readiness

Crisis readiness self-assessment

You will assess your organization's crisis readiness across eight areas using a score of 1-5. Score your organization as it is today.

1 Absent — No process or assigned responsibility exists

2 Informal — People generally know what to do, but nothing is documented

3 Partially established — Some processes and responsibilities exist, but gaps remain

4 Established — The process is documented, assigned and understood

5 Tested — You have practiced the process, addressed gaps and identified backups

Eight readiness questions (score 1-5)

For each area, identify the process, document or recent example that supports your answer.

1

Risks

Do we know our most likely and most consequential risks?

2

Escalation

Do employees know what to report and whom to contact?

3

Authority

Is it clear who activates the response and approves communications?

4

Facts

can we quickly verify information and maintain one source of truth?

Eight readiness questions (score 1-5)

For each area, identify the process, document or recent example that supports your answer.

5

Audiences

Do we know who must hear from us and in what order?

6

Spokespeople

Do we have prepared primary and backup spokespeople?

7

Coordination

Can we align board members, partners, funders and member governments?

8

Communication access

Can we reach people across geographic, technological and accessibility barriers?

What is creating the crisis readiness gap

For each area scored 1, 2 or 3, consider:

What currently exists?

What specifically is missing?

Is the process documented or carried by one person?

Would it work after hours or when a key leader is unavailable?

When did you last test it?

What existing asset could help close the gap?

Existing assets

Crisis readiness also depends on what already works:

Trusted relationships

Credible subject-matter experts

Partner and member networks

Employee and board communication channels

Existing plans, templates and contact lists

Media relationships

Community messengers

Direct access to affected groups

CONSIDERATION 1

Which assets could support your response?

CONSIDERATION 2

Which assets currently depend on informal relationships?

Identify your priority crisis readiness gaps

Select your two highest-priority gaps. They may not necessarily be those with the lowest score.

The potential consequences

The likelihood that the gap will slow a response

Whether the process depends on one person

Whether another weakness must be addressed first

Identify your priority crisis readiness gaps

For each priority gap, record:

01 Priority gap

04 Next action

02 Risk if unresolved

05 Owner

03 Existing asset

06 Deadline

Five minute reset

Next: A first-hour crisis scenario

Follow the response process

1. Response Steps

Recognize

Activate

Verify

Decide

Communicate

Monitor

2. Essential Roles

Incident
lead

Comms lead

Authorizatio
n authority

Spokesperso
n

Board and
partner
liaison

Recorder

During the Exercise

Do not wait for complete information. Confirm what you know, identify what you still need and establish when the next update will come.

But first! The first update

An effective first update includes:

What happened

What you are doing

Who may be affected and acknowledging the concern or impact on the people affected

What remains uncertain

What has been confirmed

When people can expect another update

Key Takeaway

Early communication does not require every answer. It requires verified information and clear expectations.

Holding statement

First-hour crisis response template

"We are aware of **[issue]** and understand the concern this may cause for **[affected people or community]**. Our immediate priority is **[people, service or operational action]**."

"We are reviewing the facts with **[partners or responsible parties]**. We have confirmed **[known fact]** and are still working to determine **[unknown information]**."

"We will provide another update by **[time]** through **[channel]**."

01. ACKNOWLEDGE & ACT

State the issue, recognize impact on affected stakeholders, and declare immediate actions.

02. VERIFY & INVESTIGATE

Review facts with partners, state confirmed details, and acknowledge what is still unknown.

03. COMMIT TO TIMELINE

Establish credibility by committing to a specific next update timeframe and delivery channel.

A first-hour crisis scenario

Your table is the crisis response team.

This exercise follows the opening hour of a developing crisis. Your goal is to organize the response, make initial decisions and communicate credibly before all the facts are available.

RDO structures and responsibilities vary. This fictional scenario combines functions and relationships common among NADO members.

Scenario @ 9:07 a.m.

01. THE ALLEGATION

A reporter contacts your RDO about allegations that several expenses charged to a federally funded infrastructure project may not be allowable.

02. GRANT ADMINISTRATION

A member municipality received funding for the project and engaged the RDO to assist with grant administration.

03. DOCUMENTATION & APPROVAL

RDO staff reviewed reimbursement documentation supplied by the municipality. The municipality approved the underlying project expenses.

Scenario @ 9:07 a.m.

01. MEDIA & TIMELINE

- The reporter has part of a preliminary monitoring report
- **The reporter's deadline is 10 a.m.**
- A screenshot of the report is circulating online

02. LEADERSHIP & STAFF

- The executive director cannot be reached for approximately 2 hours as they are on a flight
- Staff disagree about whether the documentation should have raised concerns

03. PARTNERS & GRANT STATUS

- The municipality has not contacted the RDO
- The agency administering the grant has not issued a final finding

Initial Response

YOUR FIRST DECISIONS

- Who leads and approves the response while the executive director is unavailable?
- What facts must you verify first?
- Who needs immediate notification?
- What can you tell the reporter now?

TASK ASSIGNMENT

Write a two- or three-sentence holding statement using only confirmed information. Acknowledge the public's concern and state when you will provide another update.

TIME ALLOTTED

12 minutes

Inject 1 @ 9:22 a.m. - The document is authentic

01. REPORT STATUS & FINDINGS

- The agency administering the grant confirms screenshot authenticity from a preliminary monitoring report.
- The report identifies missing documentation for several expenses.
- It does NOT conclude expenses were improper or that grant requirements were violated.

02. INCOMING ESCALATION

The municipality's manager emails the RDO:

"Your staff reviewed the reimbursement requests and told us the expenses met the grant requirements. The RDO needs to address this."

Response to Inject 1

YOUR NEXT DECISIONS

- What can you now confirm, and what remains uncertain?
- Who will contact the municipality and the agency administering the grant?
- What records must you locate and preserve?
- How does this information change your initial response?

TIME ALLOTTED
7 minutes

Inject 2 @ 9:39 a.m. - The dispute becomes public

PUBLIC STATEMENT & AGENCY DEMAND

Mayor (RDO Board Member) Public Post

"The RDO reviewed these expenses. Our municipality relied on its grant-administration guidance. Residents deserve a clear explanation of what happened."

- The agency administering the grant requests a briefing and supporting documentation by **10:15 a.m.**

MEDIA & INTERNAL PRESSURE

Another board member begins calling individual staff members to ask what they should say if contacted by the media.

Follow-up Reporter Inquiry (Deadline 10:00 a.m.)

"The mayor says the municipality relied on the RDO. Does your organization accept responsibility? I still need your response by 10 a.m."

Response to Inject 2

YOUR NEXT DECISIONS

- Who will contact the mayor and give board members guidance on responding to questions?
- What can you provide to the funding agency by 10:15 a.m.?
- How will you answer the reporter's question about responsibility?
- Who approves that response, and when will you provide the next public update?

TIME ALLOTTED
7 minutes

Revise holding statement

Update your statement using the information now available:

- What the RDO can confirm
- What the organization is doing
- What remains under review
- How the RDO is coordinating with the municipality and funding agency
- When the organization will provide another update

TIME ALLOTTED
7 minutes

First-hour debrief

- 01** Which decision was the most difficult, and why?
- 02** Where did the response slow down: fact verification, authority, approval or coordination?
- 03** Who needed information first, and did that order change as the situation developed?
- 04** How did shared responsibility among the RDO, municipality, board and funding agency complicate the response?
- 05** What should have been in place before 9:07 a.m.?

First-hour debrief

Could your organization:

Activate the right people?

Verify the facts?

Make decisions without every leader available?

Communicate before others defined the story?

Coordinate with partners that have different interests?

KEY REFLECTION

What one change would improve your organization's response during the first hour?

Crisis communications checklist

Crisis communications checklist

BEFORE

01

Identify and rank risks

02

Define when to activate the crisis team

03

Assign roles and backups

04

Confirm approval authority

05

Map audiences and partners

06

Update contacts and templates

07

Prepare spokespeople

08

Practice the plan

Crisis communications checklist

DURING

01

Protect people and essential services

02

Activate the response structure

03

Verify facts

04

Establish one source of truth

05

Prioritize audiences

06

Communicate what is known and under review

07

Coordinate with partners

08

Monitor developments and schedule updates

Crisis communications checklist

AFTER

01

Continue communicating with affected audiences

02

Correct inaccurate information

03

Document decisions and outcomes

04

Conduct an after-action review

05

Update the plan and training

06

Address damaged relationships

07

Track unresolved questions

Your next 30 days

What is one risk area you will address?

RECORD

01

The action you will take

02

Who needs to participate

03

When you will complete it

04

What completion will look like

A communications crisis is a matter of *when*, not *if*.

You can decide now how your organization will work together when it arrives.

Thank you!

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