

WACC POLICY

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

September, 2019

General

An essential part of crisis management is for organizations to anticipate and plan for potential future difficulties that may result in a crisis. Generally, when a crisis occurs the leaders of an organization have to make rapid and correct decisions but without necessarily having the full facts of the situation.

In anticipating potential crises it is important to make arrangements for the regular functioning of the organization. And if the crisis means that the organization has to cease functioning for a time then plans have to be in place so that “normal service” can be resumed as soon as possible.

Any threat to an organization’s credibility or reputation may affect its financial standing or ability to operate and in some countries there may be highly serious legal implications.

Crisis management is designed to restrict the damage that a crisis can inflict upon an organization and its reputation. It does so by (1) enabling it to maintain normal operations while the crisis is occurring, by (2) ensuring that the crisis itself is dealt with speedily and properly and by (3) communicating what it is doing in ways that help support, or even enhance, its reputation and credibility.

Crisis management is not about the covering up of scandal or manipulation of the press to try and excuse the inexcusable. It will not prevent problems from arising in the first place but crisis planning should reduce the number that do arise and will ensure that others are dealt with more effectively.

Good crisis management will:

- (1) minimize panic and confusion,
- (2) have crisis plans available,
- (3) quickly develop an agreed strategy,
- (4) have good communication systems,
- (5) be ready for potentially new problems,
- (6) have well functioning early-warning systems,
- (7) build trust and credibility and avoid complacency.

The Crisis Plan

A crisis plan is a formal set of procedures that enables participants in a crisis to take the minimum steps necessary to start taking control of the situation.

A crisis management plan should indicate, on the basis of risk assessment, the most likely scenarios that might lead to a crisis.

A good plan will contain clear instructions about what key people are expected to do and how essential tasks are to be undertaken.

The plan should contain a checklist of administrative actions to be taken in the immediate aftermath of being informed about a crisis.

A plan should also identify those key people (stakeholders) inside and outside the organization who might have a crucial effect on how a crisis unfolds.

Crisis plans need not be lengthy but they must be clear and updated regularly. It is important to rehearse the crisis plan in simulations of likely situations.

A Crisis Management Plan should:

- * Indicate the most likely scenarios leading to a crisis
- * Contain clear instructions for tasks and responsibilities
- * Include a checklist of administrative actions
- * Identify key people, both inside and outside the organization, who may have a crucial effect on how the crisis unfolds
- * Be clear and regularly updated

Four key roles

There are four key roles that must be present in any crisis management team:

First, *leadership*: have one clear leader. There is nothing worse than a situation in which a number of people are all trying (and failing) to exercise a leadership role.

Second, *expertise*: use the appropriate experts. The appropriate expertise needs to be assembled to give informed advice and help in relation to the specific crisis.

Third, *communications* expertise: A crisis is not a time to be struggling to find competent and credible people to deal with the media or other stakeholders.

Fourth, *support*: administrative backup. Ensure that the crisis team has the appropriate administrative backup and resources to carry out its task.

The importance of record keeping

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Accurate and systematic record keeping is very important. Those dealing with crises must accept that all of their actions will probably come under close scrutiny (if not immediately, then certainly later) and that they have to act in ways that will be seen to be reasonable and appropriate. This means that in managing a crisis it is vital that decisions and actions are recorded so that the reasons why certain measures were taken can be easily ascertained and evaluated.

The Crisis Management Team is responsible for implementing the Crisis Plan properly.

Four key roles must be present:

1. one clear leader
2. appropriate expertise
3. communications and
4. administrative backup

Communicating in a Crisis:

General Principles

Trust and credibility

There are two key principles that govern the management of communication in a crisis. The first is that the organization's main goal is to win as much trust and credibility among all its publics as it can.

Give reliable and accurate information

The second major principle governing communications is that an organization should give reliable and accurate information. As far as possible, bearing in mind legal constraints etc, all available information should be disclosed. It is also important to be honest about what is 'not known' but be willing to disclose more as it becomes available.

Put people first

It is also vitally important that communication puts people first. The tone and style of the message has to be appropriate to the seriousness of the situation.

Practical Procedures

Those dealing with crisis communications have to be involved in all levels of crisis management because they will need to know all that is going on in order to do their job properly.

Collate and write down what is known as fact

Keep an accurate log of media contacts and requests for information and the responses.

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Make a note of the key messages to be communicated

These messages should be agreed by all involved in managing the crisis and must be adhered to. Key phrases should be written out so that there is no misunderstanding and the messages are consistent. It is also crucial that the messages acknowledge the emotional dimension of the crisis and are expressed accordingly.

Prepare a Question and Answer (Q&A) document

All the questions that could be asked of the organization in relation to crisis scenarios should be listed and possible answers indicated.

Put together an initial holding statement

The purpose of the holding statement is to have something to give to the media even though very little may be known. It buys time for the organization to give time to ensure that it is in possession of relevant information and can speak with credibility. This initial holding statement should only state what is known and should avoid all speculation.

Prepare fuller statements as appropriate

As soon as possible a fuller statement should be issued to reassure any victims, stakeholders, the public and the media that the organization is taking appropriate action and are aware of the seriousness and urgency of the situation.

Source: WACC gratefully acknowledges the publication *Managing Your Reputation: A Guide to Crisis Management for Church Communicators* by Dr Jim McDonnell (Aachen, Germany): Catholic Media Council (CAMECO), 2nd revised edition 2015).