

Crisis Communications Plan

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Introduction

A *crisis* is usually considered an attack on (Group)'s reputation in the form of negative rumors or media attention. For that reason alone, it's beneficial to construct a plan for response.

Your organization may never need a crisis communications plan, but developing your own plan now may save you grief later on.

So often, vaccine educators find themselves scrambling for an appropriate response to an event that may affect the vaccination process. If your organization has a plan designed just for such events, it should provide clear guidance and save time during a crisis.

Crisis communications plans are sometimes needed to address a negative attack on some vaccine-related group or issue that has no direct connection to your organization, but something for which, as vaccine advocates, you'll want to provide a response.

Your crisis communications plan should do the following:

- Provide a complete contact sheet of employees, advisors and others connected to your organization
- Name the crisis team members and identify a leader
- Define the team members' roles and responsibilities
- Detail action steps
- Illustrate procedures to follow
- Provide a listing of resources
- Provide evaluation steps and modifications based on results

This is a template for a crisis communications plan which you will want to adjust to your needs. It has been compiled by studying many such plans and taking best practices from each. Fill in the blanks and put it all together as a protocol that will guide you in a crisis situation. Make sure several team members have a copy of this plan and know where to find it, so that any one member can step up and lead if necessary. It's important to have the plan available in the office and offsite in electronic and paper format.

Once the plan is complete, all core members and other key individuals should review it to familiarize themselves with the protocol, and one member should be assigned the responsibility of keeping it updated throughout the year.

When a crisis pops up and you have to respond quickly, keep in mind that *the truth should be the first thing out of your mouth*. If you believe the truth will not reflect well on your organization,

don't look for ways to hide, obfuscate, deny or distort. It can be painful, but better to own the problem than in any way appear to run from something that can be proven to be your responsibility. If your organization is at fault in any way, owning up to the problem and presenting solutions will go a long way toward repairing your reputation.

First Step: Crisis Communications Team (CCT)

Create a contact sheet with names, phone numbers, and street addresses of each individual employed by, advising, or in any way connected to your organization. Your Crisis Communications Team will need this sheet for quick reference as the crisis unfolds.

Keep in mind that, depending on the crisis, outside help may be required to deal with fallout. Potential outside advisors should be identified now, and contact information, along with descriptions of their expertise, should be a part of the primary contact sheet you've developed.

With contact sheet in hand, **alert the CCT**. Everyone connected to your organization should have contact information for key individuals. Word of the crisis may reach anyone in your organization, and that person has to know how to contact a team member.

The crisis team's members depend on your organization's set-up, but the following would be a good start:

- Core members for any crisis
 - the executive director
 - the head communications/PR person (will probably be CCT Leader)
 - your organization's attorney
 - support staff
- Potential members, depending on the crisis
 - any senior staff involved in the crisis subject matter (TBD by executive director or PR person)
 - any individual familiar with the situation (TBD by executive director or PR person)

Once identified, each team member will be assigned tasks for which they are responsible. You will want to write out roles and responsibilities so that there is no chance of miscommunication. Following is an example of how this might look:

Role and Responsibility	Primary Individual	Alternate Individual
<i>Spokesperson</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works with CCT to publicly issue statements to the media • Serves as (Group)'s representative at press conferences with assistance from CCT 		
<i>CCT Leader</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinates (Group)'s communication response • Coordinates with Director and communications office • Oversees message development and coordinates message with core team members • Approves dissemination of all public information • Arranges scheduled and emergency team meetings, works with senior advisors • Oversees broad and specific team functions • Ensures required resources are available for team members' assigned duties 		
<i>Assistant CCT Coordinator</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assists the team with prioritizing duties and handling inquiries • Fulfills all the duties and responsibilities of the CCTL in his/her absence • Works in close liaison with the spokesperson to ensure message accuracy • Assists with media relations. • Keeps CCTL and core decision group up-to-date on new developments • Oversees and coordinates the technology needs for the situation, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Computers/Internet/E-mail ○ Phone Lines ○ Printers/Copiers ○ Fax machines 		
<i>Executive Director</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works with CCTL and team on messaging and provides final approval for messages • May act as (Group)'s spokesperson • Ensures CCT has all the resources needed 		
<i>Legal Counsel/Advisor</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal advice on communications strategies • Legal advice on messaging to media 		
<i>Sr. Staff/Individuals (as needed)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide communication input regarding area of expertise • Assist as and where needed 		
<i>Web site and Social Media Coordinator</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinates with the CCTL to provide up-to-date information on the Internet • Monitors website and social media site comments and provides updates to the CCT 		

Second Step: Crisis Identification

Verify there is a crisis and do a quick assessment of:

- What happened and where?
- When did it happen?
- Who is involved?
- How did it happen?
- What is being done to address the problem?
- What other information is needed?
- Are the information sources credible?
- Are multiple sources confirming the information?

Determine the crisis level and that will help determine the response level. These are suggested levels from which to work:

Crisis Level	Communication Considerations
4 Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Media are demanding immediate communication about crisis. Initial (Group) statement is mandatory• One or more individuals or groups express anger• Media are on-site and broadcasting
3 Serious	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Crisis is gaining attention from local/regional media• (Group) is being contacted by media• Advisors and others close to (Group) are contacting CCT or coming to site• Those outside of CCT are insisting on talking to media
2 Intense	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unclear whether crisis situation occurred, but media is showing some interest• (Group)'s advisors are getting media queries• The public is aware but not showing interest in crisis
1 Minor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public and media are mostly unaware of the crisis

Third Step: Messages

Prepare a brief statement for the media, should something be required immediately. Don't feel compelled to do so unless the crisis calls for it. An example would be:

"We have just learned of this situation and are investigating. As soon as more information is available, it will be provided."

The crisis team now needs to discuss the information acquired during the crisis assessment and **begin developing messages**.

Make sure that any messages your organization puts out are open and honest. The quickest way out of a crisis is through the heat, so speak the truth as you craft your message.

Manage the Message

- Schedule regular communication updates for the CCT
- Commit to providing regular media updates
- Identify key audiences for your message
- Start a list of inquiries from the public and/or media
- Choose a crisis spokesperson and a backup spokesperson

Spokesperson

Choosing the right spokesperson or spokespeople is critical to the success of your organization's response to a crisis.

Take the time to evaluate possible spokespeople and then designate a **primary spokesperson and a backup spokesperson**, as the primary person may not be available every hour throughout the crisis.

Identify additional potential spokespeople who are experts in a given field, such as vaccine policy, manufacturing, families affected by preventable diseases, administration, and so on. The chances are high that such individuals will need to be called on at some point to help address certain issues, like vaccine ingredients, ACIP recommendations, or risks and benefits of vaccines.

All of your organization's spokespeople should feel relaxed in front of a camera while answering questions. Ideally, the spokespeople would have previous media training, the ability to stay on message and the know-how to speak plainly so that all listeners can understand what is being said.

If the crisis is not owned by your organization, but rather is, for instance, a case of a popular news show devoting its entire hour to someone who's anti-vaccine, then **you should be coordinating with other groups** to develop compatible messaging and delivery.

Once you've figured out the crisis level and have determined the facts of the situation, it's time to **begin planning a response strategy** for communicating the facts and for responding to potential questions for each audience. The CCT should:

- Write out the key message points
- Develop a list of questions that could be asked by a variety of audiences (families, media, partners, organizations) about the crisis
- Decide through what venues the key messages will be delivered
- Monitor the crisis and update the messages as needed

Message Approval and Release

Once messages are developed for each potential audience, all messages need to be reviewed and approved by the CCT. The executive director needs to decide who will have final approval over messages.

No matter how many messages go out to various audiences, all messages should be coordinated with the CCT. The team leader will be the one determining which approved messages go out, when they go out, and to whom each message will be sent. Don't forget, messages may go out through traditional and/or new media outlets. Make sure the CCT has seen and approved any message going out during a crisis, as this will help eliminate mistakes.

Monitoring Coverage

- Monitor local, regional and national media outlets that have inquired about the situation
- Monitor the Internet search sites for key words, such as your organization's name, the crisis, people involved, etc.
- Monitor blogs, comment boards or chat sites to assess concerns/comments
- Note the main focus for the media, and monitor any changes in that focus
- Identify media focus for which your organization has no messages, then create messages to address that focus

Note that after the crisis, your organization should review lessons learned and adapt the crisis communications plan accordingly.

See **Media Training Guide** ([link: to this document/page](#)) in the PKIDs eToolkit for help in dealing with the media.