

Crisis communication planning and nonprofit organizations

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and nonprofits

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163

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the evolution of crisis communication and management along with its inclusion into the field and practice of emergency management. This paper also discusses the inclusion of nonprofit organizations and the need for these organizations to engage in crisis communication planning and strategy creation to address the diverse and numerous crises that nonprofits are at risk of experiencing.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper utilizes a systematic literature review of crisis communication planning tools and resources focused on nonprofit organizations to derive best practices and policy needs.

Findings – The resources analyzed provide foundational insight for nonprofit organizations to proactively develop plans and strategies during noncrisis periods to support their organization when a crisis occurs.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations of this paper include limited academic research and practical resources related to nonprofit organizations and crisis communication planning. As such, several potential avenues for empirical research are discussed.

Practical implications – This paper provides considerations for nonprofit organizations engaging in crisis communication planning and aspects leaders need to partake in to reduce or eliminate the risk of facing an operational or reputational crisis.

Social implications – This paper highlights the critical need to generate a crisis communication plan due to the diverse crises nonprofit organizations face and their connection to the emergency management structure. Understanding the crisis and utilizing a crisis communication plan allows nonprofit organizations a way to strategically mitigate the impact of a crisis while also providing essential services to their respective communities and maintain their overall stability.

Originality/value – This paper is unique in its analysis of crisis communication planning resources and creation of a planning framework to assist nonprofit organizations in their planning efforts.

Keywords Crisis communication, Crisis communication planning and strategies, Nonprofit organizations

Paper type Research paper

Crisis communication and nonprofit organizations

As emergency management continues to evolve, nonprofit organizations have become a quintessential presence in disaster response and recovery efforts for local communities. Although nonprofit organizations have long been a part of disaster response and recovery activities, their formalization into emergency management practice is relatively new. This formalization within the USA is seen in the integration into the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) system. FEMA is an agency created in the USA to support the citizens and first responders to promote that as a nation we work together to build, sustain and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from and mitigate all hazards. In recent years, unprecedented crises, such as the novel coronavirus pandemic, has caused a significant increase of contributions from smaller, service-oriented nonprofits as well as foundations and other philanthropic agencies to respond to community need and work with local, state and even federal agencies to deliver services to those who are facing significant health and economic hardships.

More specifically, we see the formalization of nonprofit agencies being active in preparation, protection, mitigation, response and recovery activities within FEMA's (2011)



whole community perspective and expanded the significance of crisis-related activities along with the National Planning Frameworks connection to response and recovery agencies. Broadening responsibility from a government-centric to a community engagement perspective, [FEMA \(2011\)](#) promoted a deeper understanding of community complexity, recognition of capabilities and needs, intentional relationships with leaders, support of critical partnerships, empowerment of local action, and leverage of infrastructure, networks and assets. As stated by FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate ([2015](#)):

We need to move away from the mindset that the Federal and State governments are always in the lead, and build upon the strengths of our local communities and, more importantly, our citizens. We must treat individuals and communities as key assets rather than liabilities.

However, issues arose concerning: anticipation of community needs; adaptation of communication for crisis type; information release before, during and after a crisis; lack of initiative to communicate; inadequate or incompatible communication technology; variations in values and norms; high levels of stress and pressure on individuals and teams; rapid event shifts and changing information; tension with media and the public; poor information-gathering capacities; inability to convey accurate information and its meaning and cognition and collaboration ([Benson, 1988](#); [Bharosa et al., 2010](#); [Chandler, 2010](#); [Comfort, 2007](#); [Coombs, 2014](#); [Walker, 2012](#)). The result is crisis communication planning is more critical than ever.

Every communication situation during a crisis must be approached with consideration of many dynamics. Therefore, communicated messages are complex and ambiguous at the same time. Successful public communication seeks to balance the needs and expectations of all of these diverse audiences and speak to each of them while not miscommunicating to the remainder ([Chandler, 2010](#), p. 58).

Evolution of crisis communication

The field of crisis communication began in the 1980s with a tampering incident impacting the Johnson and Johnson corporation due to poison being injected into its Extra-Strength Tylenol product that led to the death of seven individuals along with copycat attacks leading to the death of several more individuals ([Coombs, 2014](#); [Haberaman, 2018](#)). Due to this notorious incident, interest grew for corporate organizations as society and businesses began to realize how negative consequences of improper management could have a resounding impact on their bottom line and their ability to provide services to their customers. Crisis communication and its managerial counterpart formalized into a field where individuals sought to mitigate or diminish the negative impact of a crisis and protect stakeholders.

Crisis management incorporates a set of factors to combat crises and mitigate the damage inflicted through phases of before, during and after a crisis ([Comfort, 2007](#); [Coombs, 2014](#)). Crisis Communication is defined as “the ongoing process of creating shared meaning among and between groups, communities, individuals, and agencies, within the ecological context of a crisis, for the purpose of preparing for and reducing, limiting and responding to threats and harm” ([Sellnow and Seeger, 2013](#), p. 13). Although the catalyst for crisis management occurred with the Tylenol product poisoning, the research did not amp up until the Challenger explosion of 1986 ([Coombs, 2014](#)). Researchers and interested parties focused on understanding the decision-making process regarding crises along with analyzing the rhetoric surrounding these incidents. It created the idea of apologia which became a dominant theory with researchers focusing on what managers said and did to address crises and their lack of acknowledgment for impacted stakeholders ([Coombs, 2014](#); [Dionisopoulos and Vibbert, 1988](#)).

The main hub for crisis communication research soon found itself planted in the field of public relations where publications and case studies focused on corporate apologia, image

restoration theory and threats to reputations (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2014; Hearit, 1994; Ice, 1991). Focusing on the development of strategies, researchers began examining the evidence of crisis communication into emergency management practice. Crisis communication views a crisis as an incident where “a community of people- an organization, a town, or a nation- perceives an urgent threat to core values or life-sustaining functions, which must be dealt with under conditions of uncertainty” (Boin and McConnell, 2007, p. 42). The term crisis has been applied to a diverse range of situations from natural hazards and environmental threats to infrastructural dramas, financial meltdowns or organizational decline. When crisis communication is utilized through emergency management practice, we see the act of seeking to answer questions related to the immediate situation, understanding the unexpected event and finding opportunities within the chaos to learn and develop (Birkland, 2009; Boin and McConnell, 2007; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2001).

General crisis communication strategies

In terms of general crisis communication strategies, a three-stage approach has been promoted occurring before, during and after the crisis. Within the precrisis, or before, stage, it is critical for responsible officials to focus on planning and preparation versus waiting for a crisis to occur (Coombs, 2014). This provides time to reflect and integrate a crisis communication plan into the organization’s mission, vision, policies and procedures. The crisis response, or during, stage focuses more on the implementation of policies and procedures and differentiating how an official will react to the crisis and adapt communication strategies. The post-crisis, or after, stage concerns follow-up with stakeholders and returning to a sense of calm before preparing for the next event (Coombs, 2014).

Research has discussed the impact of communication before, during and after a crisis with an emphasis on planning, information collection, organization and dissemination (Chandler, 2010; Kapucu *et al.*, 2013; Kapucu and Özerdem, 2011; Lindell and Perry, 2007; McEntire, 2018; Sylves, 2014; Waugh and Streib, 2006) as well as strategies to aid in generating timely and comprehensible messages that meet the diverse needs of its audiences (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005; Ulmer *et al.*, 2017; Walker, 2012). The general recommendations and considerations revolve around (1) how to transfer the message; (2) when to send the message; (3) will the recipient see, read or hear the message; (4) is the message comprehensible; and (5) what will be the response. The recommendations find themselves supported in emergency management focused incident command resources, such as the National Incident Management System (NIMS), where nonprofit organizations are considered and essential partner for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery operations.

The next section of the paper will focus on nonprofit organizations and the crises they face as being a part of an emergency management structure along with organizational crises they face.

Nonprofit organizations and crises

When nonprofit organizations assist in disaster response and recovery activities, they are called upon to fulfill a variety of community needs, such as sheltering, food distribution, relief funding, family reunification services and much more (Kapucu *et al.*, 2011). The participation of nonprofit organizations in federal-level response and recovery activities since the early twentieth led to their inclusion in several facets like NIMS, the Whole Community Approach, National Response Plan and National Response Framework. More specifically, the National Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD, 2020) was created as a venue for member organizations to coordinate resources and provide a logistics platform due to duplication of efforts in response and recovery activities to the 1969 impact of Hurricane

Camille along the Gulf Coast. Within their creation, they generated a guiding philosophy of communication, coordination, collaboration and cooperation. [NVOAD \(2020\)](#) recognized that all sectors must collaborate to “foster more resilient, self-reliant communities nationwide” (para. 6) and work to generate and support partnerships among local, state and federal emergency management agencies along with for-profits, foundations and educational and research institutions.

The state level parallels the frameworks and plans generated for the federal level by their inclusion of nonprofit organizations in disaster response and recovery activities. This inclusion is explicitly stated in state response plans where nonprofit organizations are included in the designation of roles and responsibilities for emergency support functions. Although the federal and state level provides guidance and support, crisis response begins at the local level and it is up to the local leaders to enact preparation, mitigation, response and recovery activities to the crises facing local communities, as well as to adapt plans to the crisis being faced. For instance, response and recovery activities for an earthquake will contrast response to a chemical spill, biological agent or terrorist event.

Nonprofit organizations and crises

Due to nonprofit organizations’ unique intersection of providing public services and also being a part of emergency management practices, they not only face hazards and disasters the created the diverse crises communities can face (i.e. natural hazard, civil/conflict and technological), but they also face organizational crises that impact their operation and reputation ([Coombs, 2014](#); [Coombs and Holladay, 2002, 2014](#); [McEntire, 2018](#); [Paton and Johnston, 2001](#); [Jordan et al., 2016](#)). In terms of operational threats, these types of crises include some threat to public safety or the nonprofit’s stakeholder welfare ([Coombs, 2014, 2015](#); [Jordan et al., 2016](#)). Reputational threats incorporate crises that are less likely to be viewed as a public safety or stakeholder welfare concern. Nonprofits are dependent upon their communities and donors for sustainability along with being held to higher expectations than their for-profit counterparts ([Sisco, 2010](#)).

Nonprofits are expected to maintain the public’s trust while also administering services that local governments are unable to provide. Nonprofits are also in a unique situation in that they do not coerce participation, they operate with fewer resources to achieve public goals and do not distribute any profits to stockholders, and they can exist without having clearly defined lines of accountability or ownership ([Lee, 2004](#); [Sisco, 2010](#)). Public trust can impact a nonprofit’s fundraising, programming success, advocacy efforts and human resources. In fact, public trust is critical to nonprofit success and any issue with their ability to operate or their reputation can cause them to struggle for survival. Nonprofits often lack the accountability structures and mechanisms that are held in place in other sector agencies; thus, when an issue is realized, public trust is even more negatively impacted.

Public trust in the Red Cross response to Haiti earthquake

The importance of public trust for nonprofits can certainly be seen in several cases of trust loss in nonprofit organizations, such as the Red Cross response to the Haiti earthquake. The earthquake struck Haiti and Dominican Republic in 2010, leading to thousands dead and hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals. The humanitarian response to the earthquake was immediate, and innovative techniques were used to quickly raise funds (the Red Cross’s donate by text campaign, donating \$10 from each individual who texted “Haiti” to 90,999). This effort raised around half a billion dollars by Red Cross ([Elliott et al., 2015](#)), who vowed to help the country rebuild roads, schools, homes, assist in water and sanitation systems and build a healthcare clinic. Years after the disaster, questions were raised by some media outlets and donors of where the money went. National Public Radio

(NPR), a privately and publicly funded nonprofit media organization, and ProPublica, an investigative journalism nonprofit organization, report that their search of the funds yielded poorly managed projects and questionable spending (Sullivan, 2015). While the Red Cross claims homes were built for 130,000 individuals, in reality six homes were built. Later investigation found that a quarter of the money donated was spent on its own internal expenses, the organization stalled on releasing important and complete information to various stakeholders, including the Government Accountability Office, regarding the relief efforts and the organization underfunded and under-resourced internal investigations (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016). The Red Cross did issue a response, yet public trust was lost due to the reports and certainly impacted how donor's think about donating to the organization moving from this disaster.

Nonprofit organizations and communication in times of crisis

The key aspect for nonprofit organizations is communication. Limited research has studied crisis communication planning and its impact on the nonprofit sector and specific organizations, yet it is evident that nonprofit organizations need to engage in crisis communication planning to mitigate the impact of crises they will face (Coombs, 2014; Sisco, 2012, 2014; Jordan *et al.*, 2016). Crises can lead to loss of donors, loss of political support and inability to meet the needs of their communities leaving their constituents to either stop receiving those services or search for another nonprofit to obtain the services (Coombs and Holladay, 2002, 2014). Moreover, their constituents are expecting communication that is considered open, honest, accurate, tailored, two-way and knowledgeable (Coombs, 2014; Coombs and Holladay, 2002, 2014). The evolution in technology and social media, including access to Internet, digital video equipment and smart devices and increasing use in social media platforms has reshaped the way that nonprofits are communicating within their networks (Shemberger, 2017). These new platforms and technology are providing nonprofits ways to advance their two-way channels and connect users with information and resources.

The overall goal of communication is to minimize reputational damage from crises and be able to continue being a positive collaborator in emergency-related activities, along with being able to sustain their organizational missions and meet the needs of their communities (Benoit, 1995; Coombs and Holladay, 2014). Nonprofit organizations should not only generate a crisis communication plan but create adaptations to this plan depending on the crisis being faced along with setting aside time to practice the plans with members of the organizational hierarchy and community partners. The next section of this paper will focus on crisis communication strategies, crisis communication plans and purported best practices for crisis communication in relation to nonprofit organizations.

Crisis communication strategies and planning for nonprofit organizations

Nonprofit organizations spend ample time strategically planning their mission, vision, values and the goals they want to achieve within the communities they serve. One crisis badly managed can derail all of their strategic plans and lead to dire consequences. Therefore, it is beneficial to not only strategically plan the growth of the organization but what to do when the organization is facing a crisis. Moreover, what will the organization do for the diverse types of crises that they are at risk of facing?

Crisis communication and management are an avenue for nonprofits to pursue these planning endeavors. The issue, however, is nonprofit leaders may not have previously learned how to plan their crisis communication strategies and integrate these strategies into their overarching crisis management approach. The lack of knowledge and practice can negatively impact their resilience capacity when faced with diverse crises from natural

hazards to reputational or operational threats. An example of a crisis that damaged the reputational and organizational capacity of a nonprofit is the case of United Way of America (UWA) where slanderous articles of UWA unveiling poor monetary accountability, nepotism and mismanagement leading to the cancellation of campaign pledges, major donations and the president resigning, being indicted, and charged guilty for all allegations ([Jordan et al., 2016](#)).

Where to begin?

The question can then be: Where to begin? To answer this question, the researchers conducted a systematic search for crisis communication planning resources targeted toward nonprofit organizations. The key search terms utilized included “crisis communication,” “planning,” “nonprofit organization(s),” and “strategies.” The results needed to have a direct connection between crisis communication “planning” or “strategies” along with an explicit focus on the nonprofit arena. In addition, the sources needed to be in English. Emergency management as a field has become increasingly professionalized and internationalized, though application from the USA to other countries may be hindered due to insufficient comparative methodologies ([McEntire and Mathis, 2007](#)). While the focus here is on the USA, we acknowledge the importance of comparison in approach in different geographies to contribute to emergency management literature, particularly because of the growing NGO sector internationally.

In terms of results, there were a limited number of peer-reviewed journal publications and they mostly focused on case study analysis of nonprofit organizations and their use or non-use of crisis communication strategies or the application of crisis communication theory. A generalized search using web-based search engines produced results such as resource guides or toolkits, opinion pieces, blog posts and news articles; however, only seven resources were focused on crisis communication planning for nonprofit organizations, developing plans, specific strategies to utilize and original insights versus citations to these more formalized resources or simply stating the importance of crisis communication plans and the need to have one. The location of these sources all fell within the USA; this may be due to the language necessity of English.

Although not all resources encompassed the key terms, there was an overall encouraging message of the critical need for crisis communication planning and the emphasis to plan during noncrisis periods, as this is an essential element to planning. Planning during noncrisis time periods allows for the time needed to brainstorm strategies, generate a crisis management organizational hierarchy, determine any resource or logistical needs, practice the plan with the organization’s members as well as relevant community partners, collaborate with local emergency managers to check with the community’s comprehensive emergency management plan and reduce duplication of efforts and identify any missing aspects and to check with the nonprofit’s legal team to determine any potential liabilities. All of these aspects assist with building the resilience capacity of the organization and have the best chance to reduce or eliminate any negative impact to the organization ([Paton and Johnston, 2001](#)).

Analyzing select crisis communication planning resources for nonprofit organizations, [Table 1](#) provides a brief summary of the strategies included in the resources.

Results

Colorado nonprofit association

Analyzing the selected resources, each document provides unique insights for the nonprofit sector. The Colorado Nonprofit Association ([CNA, 2014](#)) provides a template for nonprofit organizations to support their own development of a crisis communication plan and adapting

Source	Date	Strategies for crisis communication planning
Colorado Nonprofit Association (CNA)	2014	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Identify the purpose of the crisis communication plan (2) Identify who is to utilize the crisis communication plan (3) Generate policies based off of the plan and for implementation (4) Create a checklist that includes safety, notification, crisis communication team, steps to take before going public, what to do when going public and evaluation of the efforts (5) Select persons to be part of the internal emergency phone tree (6) Strategically create the crisis communications plan to have internal pre-preparation, safety, notifications, a team, situational assessment, decision-tree matrix, key messages, staff notification, board and chair notification, media releases, partner and key group notification, record keeping, media-message evaluation, communications updates, loose- ends, evaluations and post-crisis clean-up
Compassion Capital Fund (CCF)	n.d.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Identify a hierarchy for the communication process (2) Generate key statements for stakeholders and media connections (3) Utilize crisis communication to supplement a risk management and response plan
Sean Norris from NonProfitPro Podcast	2015	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Tell it all, tell it early (2) Have a plan (3) Determine what you would do if you were to the response before the crisis, during and after
Meg Shannon from Nonprofit MarCommunity	2015	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Issue vs. crisis- know the difference (2) Create a worst-case scenario (3) Build your team (4) Have an escalation plan (5) Practice makes perfect (6) During the crisis: Don't let it fester (7) Gather the facts (8) Craft a statement (9) Address the crisis where it happened (10) Take responsibility and forget about blame
Tom Ciesielka of TC Public Relations	2015	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Utilize professional not-for-profit resources (2) Engage in online social media monitoring (3) Utilize professional public relations tools and services (4) Generate a public relations crisis planning worksheet encompassing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initial public relations objectives • target audience • target media contacts • consequences • top-tier audiences • credibility and expertise • monitoring • staffing and • inventory of public relations tools (5) Educate yourselves with public relations texts and resources and maintain a list of these resources

(continued)

Table 1.
Crisis communication
resources for nonprofit
organizations

Table 1.

Source	Date	Strategies for crisis communication planning
Allyssa Lenhoff-Briggs	2018	(1) Identify your crisis communications team (2) Anticipate possible problems and crisis (3) Identify spokespeople (4) Identify audiences (5) Establish notification systems (6) Create foundational statements (7) Assess the crisis (8) Create crisis-specific messaging (9) Monitor systems (10) Analyze after the crisis
New England Insurance Services	n.d.	(1) Generate action steps (2) Gather information (3) Contacting emergency services (4) Determine ways to stabilize the situation (5) Identify crisis headquarter locations (6) Prepare a script (7) Create a contact sheet (8) Mobilize a crisis team (9) Determine emergency and support sources (10) Media management tips (11) Identify post-incident follow-up (12) Create a crisis response kit (13) Organize files and prepare reports (14) Have a Plan-B (15) Engage in self-care

it to their organization’s resources, structures and messages. The template begins by highlighting the importance of defining the purpose of the crisis communication plan. [CNA \(2014\)](#) states their purpose as: “To effectively manage communications through a formal, clearly defined channel in order to mitigate crisis, or serious negative repercussions for the Association or the sector, and maintain a reputation of leadership and transparency on vital issues and breaking news” (p. 2).

Outlining a purpose provides an overarching direction and use of the crisis communications plan. Once the purpose has been established then a statement of how to use the plan can be developed. Understanding how to use the plan can assist with identifying responsible parties and how to educate each category of staff as to their role and responsibility. Another unique aspect of [CNA’s \(2014\)](#) crisis communication plan is the policies concerning the plan and its implementation. Connecting to policies provides organizational support and showcases intentionality. Similar to other resources, [CNA’s \(2014\)](#) plan incorporates checklists and emphasis of actions to take prior to engaging with internal and external stakeholders and also incorporates an emphasis on situational assessment. Conducting a situation assessment allows the organization to gather facts, analyze the crises, delegate responsibilities and determine what needs to be adapted to the unique environment created by the crisis.

In addition, [CNA \(2014\)](#) incorporates sample media statements, key messages for the organization and a matrix to assist with the decision-making process. The decision tree begins with determining whether the issue affects a substantial portion of the nonprofit sector, the organization and/or the community. Depending on the magnitude, the tree takes the organization through specific considerations and relevant actions to take. For example, if an issue affects a substantial part of the organizations then the question arises of whether the

organization has a clear position on the issue. If there is a clear position then the decision tree will take the organization to more considerations of whether proactive action will lead to a positive outcome, would it demonstrate leadership, does it relate to the overall goals of the organization or whether is action necessary for positive impact to the reputation of the organization.

Compassion capital fund

The [Compassion Capital Fund's \(n.d.\)](#), this resource guide focuses more on risk management and views crisis communication planning as a supportive endeavor to mitigating any negative impacts. It is important to note the difference between risk management and crisis management. Risk management is focused more on threats to an organization's capacity, such as financial, legal, or management issues and methods to reduce harm. Crisis communication integrates the aspect of risk, but focuses more on specific crisis types, what is known and not known, the scope of impact, strategies for mitigation and views communication as the avenue for being principally informative. Therefore, CCF's guide speaks to crisis communication plans as supplementing the risk management plan and being the information hub for the response team and encompasses a communication hierarchy and key statements for stakeholders and media sources.

NonProfitPro podcast

[Norris \(2015\)](#) from NonProfitPro podcast provides a key aspect of crisis communication planning and strategy implementation is communicated internally and externally. A plan cannot be implemented effectively if all of the organization's staff is unaware of what to do or how they will be informed. Within the plans, the strategies created need to address how to create a messaging platform for internal stakeholders as well as external. Moreover, do not be afraid of communicating with external stakeholders. Organizations are better able to mitigate negative damage to their reputation and operation if they engage with external stakeholders early on and provide a cohesive message ([Norris, 2015](#)).

Nonprofit marcommunity

[Shannon \(2015\)](#) from Nonprofit MarCommunity emphasizes the difference between an issue versus a crisis. An issue is a negative situation the organization must process, but it does not have a long-lasting impact on its operations or reputation. An issue can turn into a crisis if there is a long-lasting impact to the organization's operation or reputation. Examples include the UWA financial management crisis, the American Red Cross' problematic response during Hurricane Sandy and Isaac and numerous local-level nonprofits who faced reputational threats after financial mismanagement surfaced or inaccurate reporting of services rendered ([Norris, 2015](#); [Sisco et al., 2010](#)).

Another exercise promoted by [Shannon \(2015\)](#) is to generate a worst-case scenario. If this exercise was conducted while going through every crisis the organization could face then there is a chance to create strategies and have them ready before needed. Granted, this does not mean the organization plans for every single crisis in the world but understanding what is at risk of and preparing accordingly. Moreover, these exercises can also provide a space to develop crisis communication plans, but go deeper and think of what the organization needs to do should the crisis escalate further.

TC public relations

[Ciesielka \(2015\)](#) of TC Public Relations provides more of a resource packet that includes professional not-for-profit resources such as data collection and analysis organizations,

educational organizations providing access to articles, journals and university collected crisis communication plans. [Ciesielka \(2015\)](#) also connects readers to social media monitoring technology and public relations tools and services to improve the plans and strategies of organizations. Ultimately, nonprofit organizations know what they know and what they do not know. Taking time to acknowledge organizational strengths, weaknesses and how to supplement then positively impacts plans and strategies developed. Moreover, [Ciesielka \(2015\)](#) offers a public relations worksheet to have space for organizations to identify objectives, their target audience, media contacts, consequences, top-tier audiences, credibility and expertise, monitoring, staffing and inventory of public relations tools. This worksheet can be a starting point for organizations that are unsure how to analyze crises and determine how to break it down into actionable steps.

Lenhoff-Briggs

[Lenhoff-Briggs \(2018\)](#), this resource provides a ten-step process focused on crisis management and the reality that a crisis can occur at any time and that the worst thing that can occur is for a nonprofit to say nothing when chaos erupts. Moreover, nonprofit organizations benefit from taking time to anticipate potential issues and crises that the organization could face. Determining an organization's risk can include threats to their reputation, operation or the potential disasters they may face due to location, client base and funding structure. The overarching push is to be proactive versus reactive in nature.

[Lenhoff-Briggs \(2018\)](#) also speaks to the designation of a spokesperson and to select this individual very carefully. The spokesperson should be someone other than the chief executive officer as president, as they need to be an individual who is comfortable speaking to audiences, calm, diplomatic, quick-thinking, able to stay on message and knowledgeable about handling messages through social media avenues. This individual must also be willing to have extensive training as to the mission and vision of the organization and its reputational and operational capacity. In addition, [Lenhoff-Briggs \(2018\)](#) and [Norris \(2015\)](#) emphasize the need to assess the crisis and also analyze the after-crisis impact to the organization and the strategies utilized.

New England insurance services

New England Insurance Services ([NEIS, n.d.](#)) provides insights into the information gathering portion of crisis management when the organization is needing to answer the who, what, when, where, why, how and what now. In addition, NEIS speaks to the immediate aftermath of a crisis and the need to stabilize the situation and make sure everyone is ready to engage with the public and the media along with implementing crisis communication plans. It is an important moment of time to gather thoughts and resources before moving forward. In addition to stabilizing the situation, there is a need to designate a crisis headquarters.

Similar to an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) where emergency managers direct all the emergency support functions and gather all essential personnel, the crisis headquarters is the nonprofit's EOC and place where the crisis is managed. Along with establishing a headquarters, the nonprofit organization can create a crisis response kit that includes essential items, such as: (1) notebooks; pencils; pens; computers; necessary chargers; back-up generators; emergency services telephone numbers; list of staff and volunteers; list of emergency contact numbers; list of support services and numbers; list of media contacts; a copy of the crisis response plan; flashlights; weather radio; blankets; first aid kits; bottled water; snacks and other necessities ([NEIS, n.d.](#)). The headquarters is also a place to have any relevant files organized and have the ability to prepare reports for distribution.

Resource integration

Integrating the feedback and insights from these resources, the researchers created a generalized strategic planning process for crisis communication planning (see [Figure 1](#)) and foresee the need for additional research to test the framework and create a comprehensive resource for nonprofit organizations utilizing the components created.

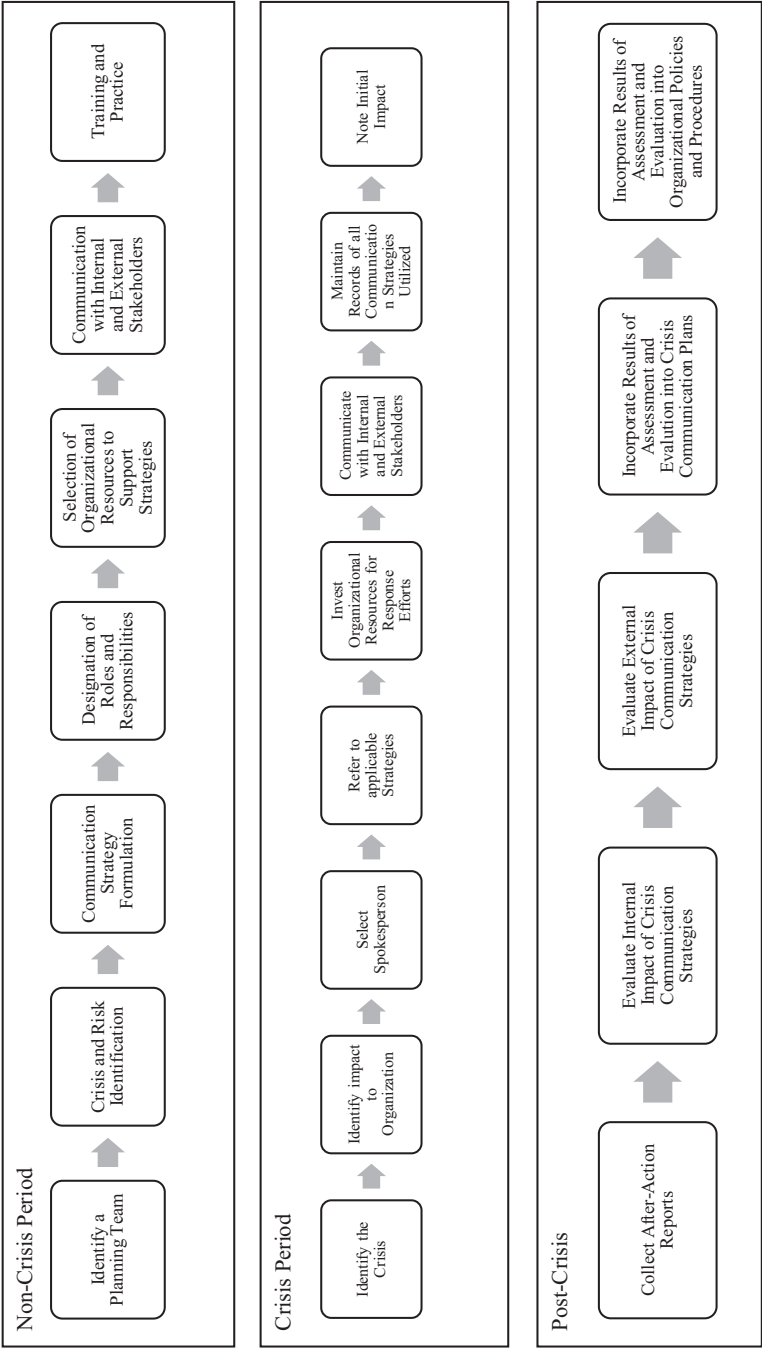
Crisis communication planning figure application

To preliminarily test the framework, the case of the Red Cross response to Haiti earthquake was analyzed. As previously discussed, the earthquake struck Haiti and Dominican Republic in 2010 with immediate humanitarian response utilizing innovative techniques to quickly raise funds. This effort raised around half a billion dollars by the Red Cross who vowed to help the country rebuild roads, schools, homes, assist in water and sanitation systems and build a healthcare clinic. However, the results of the fundraising effort were minimal and led to an investigative report showcasing poorly managed funds and only six homes built. This contrasted the Red Cross' claims that homes were built for 130,000 individuals. The investigation also highlighted how a quarter of the money donated was spent on internal expenses and the Red Cross stalled on releasing important and complete information to various stakeholders, including the government accountability office, regarding the relief efforts and the organization underfunded and under-resourced internal investigations. The Red Cross did issue a response, yet public trust was lost and has since impacted donor activity ([Elliott et al., 2015](#); [Sullivan et al., 2016](#)).

There are two crises here. The first is the Red Cross' response to the earthquake and generating funds to attempt to rebuild Haiti and not delivering on their initial agreements. The response to this lack of delivery led to the second issue, which was a significant loss of public trust. This leads to negative impacts to the Red Cross organization itself. Analyzing this case against the crisis communication planning figure, the pre-crisis period is difficult to ascertain without documents and insights from the Red Cross. For the crisis period, we see the Red Cross successfully identified the crises and the needs of the community. They initiated response efforts for fundraising and utilized an innovative technique of texting for donations utilizing a unique code. It led to raised funds of \$148.5m within the first six months ([Red Cross, 2020](#)). However, issues quickly surfaced leading many media sources and donors to question what was going on. What we did not see in their crisis communication strategies is open, honest, accurate, tailored, two-way and knowledgeable messages. This is evidenced through a spokesperson that was not knowledgeable in Haitian culture and unable to speak Creole. In addition, there was limited interaction with the Haitian government, a lack of transparency regarding fund distribution and lack of delivery on promises to build homes and help Haiti with infrastructure.

During the post-crisis period, the Red Cross identified their consequential crisis of loss of public trust and was forced to evaluate internal and external impacts. The impact of not incorporating crisis communication strategies and identifying a culturally competent spokesperson, pilot testing the text messaging donation method, having transparent and timely communication efforts in multiple languages led loss of public trust and the need for the organization to mitigate this impact by incorporating more transparency and accountability within their internal structure. In addition, they had to change their focus to image restoration and validating their public value. To do this, the Red Cross published a two and ten-year update with a complete financial breakdown and created a YouTube video series to provide visual documentation of their efforts ([Red Cross, 2020](#)).

Figure 1.
Crisis communication
planning framework



Conclusion

To support effective crisis communication, nonprofit organizations and their respective crisis manager should operate in such a way that their crisis communication messages are characterized as: open, honest, accurate, tailored, two-way and knowledgeable. Some additional identified best practices include: promoting effective communication regarding process approaches and policy development; pre-event planning; partnerships with the public; listening to the public's concerns and understanding the audience; collaboration and coordination with credible sources; meeting the needs of the media and remaining accessible; communicating with empathy and concern; accepting uncertainty and ambiguity and promoting self-efficacy (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005; Seeger, 2006).

The more attention that a [crisis manager] can give to providing information on hazards, risk, and protective measures in non-crisis situations, the more likely it is that such information communicated during an actual emergency will result in adaptive citizen actions (Perry and Nigg, 1985, p. 76).

Essentially, the more attention given to crisis communication strategies and adaptations for local community needs then the more resilient a nonprofit organization and their community can become.

For the development of crisis communication plans and strategies, the analyzed resources provide foundational insight for nonprofit organizations to proactively develop plans and strategies during noncrisis periods to support their organization when a crisis occurs. Overall, research and practical guidelines suggest strategies for nonprofit crisis managers and leaders to partake in to reduce or eliminate the risk of facing an operational or reputational crisis. These initial strategies include, for example, if the organization is the first to disclose a threat then this will be received better than if the media or another organization shares the issue with the public. Nonprofit organizations also need to engage in crisis communication planning with intentionality and establish a purpose along with organizational policies to support their efforts. These organizations also need to understand target audiences, know what will make community members continue their volunteer or financial support, see crises as an opportunity for change and renewal and be honest and apologize sincerely (Kinsky *et al.*, 2014).

Future research includes development of a comprehensive crisis communication planning resource for nonprofit organizations utilizing crisis communication strategies and theories that acknowledge the unique crises nonprofits face within the emergency management structure and as an organization. Due to nonprofit organizations increasing in their presence during preparation, mitigation, response and recovery activities, more research is needed to examine the effectiveness of crisis communication planning resources and the plans themselves. Moreover, a specific focus is needed for those within the emergency management structure. Additional research is also needed regarding nonprofit educational programs to determine the inclusion of crisis communication planning along. Furthermore, instructional materials, such as case studies, need to be developed to assist nonprofit management students and current nonprofit organizations in their crisis communication planning efforts. Lastly, more research can incorporate the development of an in-depth, comprehensive guide for nonprofit organizations integrating crisis communication strategies and theories within planning efforts from its inception to implementation and within noncrisis, crisis and post-crisis time periods.

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