



# CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Four Things Your  
Board Needs to Know

## 1 EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED.

It's not enjoyable to focus on the negative things that could happen to your organization, but it is the responsible thing for board leaders to do.

- A devastating storm could destroy its facilities, property, and community infrastructure.
- Mismanagement or, worse, criminal action by a staff member could tarnish its reputation.
- The loss of major funding could threaten programs and services that your community depends on.

Events like these happen and should prompt all board members to ask: What unexpected event could happen to us? What will we do if it does?

The board's fundamental task in a crisis is to ensure that the organization operates legally and ethically. It also may be called on to perform nontraditional and unexpected duties. In an extraordinary situation, the board even might have to step in temporarily to help manage a crisis if the staff can't or shouldn't handle it. Additionally, in any crisis, board members should work to convey consistent messages to their network of contacts in the community, letting them know that the issue is being well managed, promising updates on the situation, and inviting feedback to convey to the chief executive and staff.

Organizational crises are usually sensitive matters that involve a careful balance between appropriate transparency and not over-communicating before the organization has taken action to address the situation.

## 2 THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF CRISES: EMERGENCIES & CONTROVERSIES

Emergencies are unpredictable events that can create havoc for an organization or the people it serves and harm its ability to deliver on its mission. Losing a major source of funding can be considered an emergency. The responsibility for handling emergencies rests primarily with the staff, with board members providing support where and when appropriate. Emergencies sometimes can be dealt with in a single communication campaign,

but more often they require updates, additional information, status reports, and monitoring until the emergency is under control.

**Controversies** are crises that threaten the organization's reputation. They blindside even the most prudent organization. Responding to a controversy usually requires board involvement. A communications plan enables the board to prepare for this involvement.

## 3 PLANNING IS KEY TO SUCCESSFUL CRISIS COMMUNICATION.

Crisis and controversies are rarely one-day stories. Events happen, people ask questions, more information becomes available, differing perspectives begin to emerge, and subsequent events shape perceptions of the original triggering event. It happens all the time. It is impossible to know what sequence of events will occur, but having a crisis communications plan in place will help ensure that priority stakeholders are kept informed, that all factual information is stored in a critical location, and that there is a single spokesperson who can communicate on behalf of the organization in a convincing and reassuring manner.

A good starting point in crisis communication planning is a board discussion centered on the following questions:

- What are the emergencies and controversies that could affect our organization?
- What are our greatest vulnerabilities?
- What questions from the press would we least like to face?
- How can we prevent worse-case scenarios from occurring?

## 4 A CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN ADDRESSES FIVE SETS OF QUESTIONS.

1. Who speaks for the organization?
2. Who is responsible for managing the crisis, and what are their duties?
3. Where should the command center be for responding to the crisis? What resources will be needed?

4. What are the responsibilities of the crisis control team and who should be a part of it?
5. What information is appropriate to give to the public?

Potential members for a crisis control team include a human resources specialist, a financial officer, and a legal authority for the organization. Above all, the team should include trusted people who can remain focused under pressure. A collaborative approach to crisis planning and management will ensure that both staff and board perspectives are involved. The composition of the crisis control team also may need to change based on the nature of the crisis and should be evaluated on an occasional basis as the organization evolves.

Crisis communication planning is a three-step process.

The first step is the hypothetical planning to prepare for the unexpected; there is no problem yet.

The second step is revisiting the plan when a crisis does occur to review the earlier assumptions against what has actually happened. The plan may need some tweaking to address the current situation.

The third step is evaluating the plan post-crisis to determine how it might need to be changed to better address future crises.

A plan should clearly define the roles for the board and staff to avoid confusion. Be sure to include all the information needed for dealing with a crisis, such as

- contact information for crisis control team members, updated annually
- contact information for key stakeholders (donors, members, government, media, policymakers, partnering organizations, etc.)
- a media strategy, including a press kit with facts about the organization
- essential policy statements
- talking points to frequently asked questions
- logistics for establishing a command center
- logistics for convening an emergency board meeting
- a communication tree

As part of the planning process, every organization should designate a spokesperson, usually the chief executive or the board chair as well as a second and third option.

Staff should be trained annually on this and all applicable agency policies. New board members should be informed of this policy and the full board should review it periodically.