

## Don't Panic, Plan

HOW TO STRUCTURE A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM TO PROMOTE PREPAREDNESS



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Warren Buffet said, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.” Today’s high-tech, competitive marketplace leaves little room for error for any organization trying to protect its reputation. What starts as an unknowingly lax approach to email security turns into a massive data breach. Within minutes, an organization can slip into crisis mode with little chance of coming out unscathed. The problem — no matter the size or intention of an organization, issues will happen. The solution — manage the issue before it becomes a crisis by developing a well-defined preparedness plan led and managed by the corporate communications function.

### THE POWER OF A PLAN

Nothing is less motivating than planning for the worst. But it’s the planning that will allow an organization to mobilize quickly when an issue arises. Depending on the severity of the issue, there may only be hours to address the problem before it negatively impacts an organization’s reputation. This is particularly true once news media get involved. A well-organized plan allows you to anticipate the potential issues, assign a team to resolve them and have a clear approach to messaging, policies and other protocols. When problems are contained and addressed quickly, an organization’s reputation is more likely to remain intact.

### PROGRAM BASICS

#### 1. Scenario planning

A solid crisis communications program starts with understanding your organization’s potential issues. Some common scenarios include workplace violence and labor relations; other issues are industry specific such as product recalls or supply chain problems. To identify the most relevant issues, survey an array of company leaders to learn what is top of mind for them. You will soon be able to identify key themes for a detailed and actionable plan, capturing only the most relevant scenarios.

#### 2. Role definition

Once scenarios are defined, build a crisis response team and divide roles by strategic, tactical and communication responsibilities (Figure 1).

#### 3. Protocol identification

It’s critical to define how the crisis team will mobilize when an issue arises. This includes creating an escalation process and workflow for sharing information. Not all issues require the same response and mobilization, so understanding the differences of severity will enable you to respond more efficiently. For example, defining issue escalation with “yellow-orange-red” will determine if a small group monitors a minor situation (yellow) or if you mobilize all levels of the response team to address a massive issue (red).

#### 4. Guidebook Building

Gathering scenarios, teams and processes into a single document will serve as the foundation of the program and house critical messaging that will make crisis mobilization efficient. This guidebook should reflect the structure of the plan and, more specifically, detail approved messaging for each scenario. Given the sensitive nature of the information, the guidebook should be hosted on a password-protected intranet or file-sharing site and printed as a hard copy in a secure area if computer and internet access becomes unavailable.

### MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

A dated, inaccurate plan can be as ineffective as no plan, so it’s critical to ensure crisis plans are consistently reviewed and updated. This can be done both in real time and through a quarterly review. During a regular review, you are evaluating whether scenarios are still relevant and if there are new, potential issues to add. You are also identifying and confirming members of the response team and engaging with them to ensure their awareness of their roles. To keep the plan content fresh and the team energized, executing a bi-annual team call and/or quarterly newsletters around the plan and processes are a simple way to ensure the continued momentum you started when first bringing your crisis plan to life.

### Did you know ?

There are many app providers that specialize in crisis preparedness. A password-protected app gives on-demand access to crisis communications guidebooks and provides a quick way for your crisis response team to identify and resolve issues.

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Therese Van Ryne is the director of global public relations, industry analyst relations and customer references for Zebra Technologies. In this role, she is focused on helping grow company sales and awareness by driving Zebra’s thought leadership strategy aligned with core business goals and objectives.

Figure 1: ROLE DEFINITION

	Role within Company	Role within Crisis Response Team	General Responsibilities within Crisis Response Team
<b>Strategic Level</b>	C-Suite, legal	Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning</li> <li>• Training and exercises</li> <li>• Personnel and equipment certifications</li> </ul>
		Resource Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify resources</li> <li>• Mobilize resources</li> <li>• Reimbursement</li> </ul>
<b>Tactical Level</b>	Select business leads (e.g., leaders of various levels who align to the issues identified and should be able to represent their function well and make business decisions)	Incident Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-scene command and control procedures for the issues that pertain to their company role or department function</li> </ul>
<b>Communications / Support Level</b>	Corporate communications, IT, subject matter experts (as needed)	Communications and Information Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop information policies</li> <li>• Develop and manage communications systems</li> <li>• Develop and use common terminology and interoperability standards</li> <li>• Disseminate communications</li> </ul>