

COMMUNICATION

HANDBOOK

CRISIS

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Developed by:
Life Services Network
Public Relations Task Force
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Introduction

Life Services Network is pleased to present this Crisis Communication Handbook. The handbook, originally developed in 1996 with the assistance of LSN's Public Relations Task force has been revised to assist the staffs of long term care, retirement housing, assisted living and home and community based service providers in developing a crisis communication plan. A crisis communication plan provides a proactive process to communicate with media, all staff, clients, their families and other relevant publics to facilitate a timely positive outcome.

It is important to remember that the degree to which your organization effectively responds to a crisis affects your relationships with all your publics.

A Crisis Communication Plan serves many purposes in addition to being an effective communication mechanism. If your organization currently has a crisis communication plan in place, you are encouraged to review this document in conjunction with your own and make any necessary updates and/or revisions. If your organization does not currently have a crisis communication plan, this handbook will serve as a valuable resource in developing a plan.

It is important to remember that the degree to which your organization effectively responds to a crisis affects your relationships with all your publics. With this in mind, it is clear that an effective crisis communication plan is critical to an organization. It is also important to note that a crisis communication plan is not a disaster plan, but rather, a plan that should be used in conjunction with a disaster plan, should the need arise. However, since not every crisis is a disaster, the plan should function on its own, as well.

This handbook has been divided into four sections:

- Anticipating a Crisis
- Identifying a Crisis
- Precepts, Personnel & Process
- Checklists

No organization can prepare for every contingency, but a crisis communication plan that includes basic procedures will help you should a crisis occur. Strong organizational values, clear policies, a set of known procedures, and a readiness to act quickly will make the difference in how effectively your organization handles the situation and how your organization is perceived thereafter.

Anticipating A Crisis

Unfortunately, a crisis is inevitable. If it has not already happened to you...it will.

The following items should be addressed before a crisis ever happens. Careful attention to these details will help you respond effectively to a crisis.

Work with
your
organization's
upper
management
so the
importance of
a crisis
communication
plan is
understood
by all.

- Maintain an ongoing good relationship with the media.
- Establish a central crisis communication team.
- Make crisis management part of all employee orientation.
- Keep an updated list of pertinent staff phone numbers, including home numbers and pager numbers in your office and at your home.
- Compile a list of replacements to serve on the crisis communication team in the event any of the central crisis team members is unavailable.
- Designate a spokesperson.
- Create a form to use in developing a Fact Sheet.
- Designate a site in your facility for a media center - a location for all media to be directed. Notify all staff of this site.
- Work with your organization's upper management so the importance of the crisis communication plan is understood by all.
- Evaluate your crisis communication plan annually.

Identifying A Crisis

A crisis can be anything that can generate negative perceptions about your organization/industry.

By doing a certain amount of planning in the form of "what if?" scenarios, the goal of turning a potentially negative situation into a positive is a real possibility.

A crisis can be local and specific to your organization.

- physical/emotional abuse of a client
- financial stability of your organization
- misrepresentation of facts
- emergency facility physical plant
- problems
- fire & evacuation emergencies

A crisis can be either an emergency or a controversial issue. Emergencies include threats to the physical wellness of the organization including fires, bomb threats, lack of heat or air-conditioning etc. Other emergencies include resident abuse, suspicious death, outbreak of infectious disease etc. Also recognize that emergencies can result from acts by disgruntled employees, management practices, workplace safety and other situations that can adversely affect an organizations reputation.

Any change in your organization can have damaging repercussions.

- New Construction
- Addition of Services or a Change in the Provision of Services
- Change in Employees

It is important to consider the role of a crisis communication plan in the daily operations of your organization. **Any change in your organization (good or bad) has the potential to become a crisis.** By recognizing this and doing a certain amount of planning in the form of "what if?" scenarios, the goal of turning a potentially negative situation into a positive is a real possibility.

Crisis can be national issues or issues specific to the older adults.

- nursing home quality
- Social Security
- Medicare/Medicaid
- abuse and neglect
- prescription drug benefits for seniors
- restraints
- hypothermia/heat related problems with the elderly
- perception of lack of activity or loneliness with the elderly

Negative and misleading media reports on issues affecting the elderly have become commonplace. In recent months, several television exposes have been released documenting abuse of the elderly in long term care facilities, financial mismanagement etc. These issues, although not targeting your organization specifically, paint a negative image of your organization and should be treated as a crisis. Having a plan to deal with this negative publicity is essential.

Precepts

Perception is reality. The way in which your organization is perceived, is the reality of your organization's image.

Any event that is not dealt with effectively in a timely manner is a potential crisis and be more damaging in the future.

A crisis is not the end of the world. No matter how devastating a problem may seem, your publics will measure you not on the fact that it occurred, but on how well you handled it. Crisis do not happen at opportune times. Your first reaction may be to "lay low and maybe it will go away"; and perhaps it will. But if it doesn't, the situation may develop rapidly and you will have lost precious planning moments while hoping the situation would resolve itself.

Your objective should be to get the whole story told. All the facts that your publics have a right and the need to know.

Honesty is the only policy.

In a crisis, the first impulse is to hide the facts, the second is to rush out an announcement before you have the facts. Your objective should be to get the whole story told. All the facts that your publics have a right and the *need* to know. In other words, you need to be forthcoming quickly with all the information that the public has a right to know, and at the same time you have a responsibility to consider privacy and legal liability concerns. You must consider the privacy of your clients, their families and your employees, as well as what is and what is not appropriate public information.

"No Comment" is NEVER an appropriate response.

Never. It is best to avoid saying "no comment". It gives the perception that you are hiding something. Even if you don't have the answer to a specific question, it is better to respond with "I don't have the answer to your question, but I will find out."

Any written document should be considered public domain.

Be careful with what you leave around for others to see. An internal memo can easily get into a reporters hand.

Precepts

The visibility you receive in a crisis situation will either reinforce a public perception of an organization with strong values that knows what it's doing, or of one that got caught by surprise and looked ineffective.

The timeliness and the manner in which you respond with your publics is critical and will have tremendous influence on how the crisis is perceived.

Providing your publics with as much information as possible about the crisis, as quickly as possible, demonstrates that your organization is handling the situation candidly and forthrightly. By demonstrating this, you are maintaining your publics confidence that this kind of incident will not happen again.

Make sure you have a designated place/room to direct the media. . .you don't want media roaming around your facility.

Contain the crisis.

- Watch for misperception and misinformation

As stated previously, your goal is release information in as timely a manner as possible. Of course, if the situation is such that new information important to the public becomes known later, the facts will need to be updated. But the goal is still to give all the facts quickly and then to contain endless reporting by repeating only those facts, not feeding the frenzy for related stories and emotional reactions. Letting publics, especially the press, pry details from you and others over several days ensures the reporters will view each piece of information as a major story to be displayed on the front page of your local newspaper. Additionally, if a crisis results in the media arriving at your organization, make sure you have a designated place/room to direct the media. Media should be supervised at all times.

Watch for misinformation and misrepresentation. The press has other sources (i.e. police, witnesses, families, etc.) Be aware of false information and rumors and deal with them.

Personnel

If you have a crisis communication team, no one needs to wonder who to call when a crisis occurs. The decision has already been made at the best possible time, when every thing is running smoothly.

Designate a crisis communication team.

This team may include:

- CEO/Executive Director or
- Administrator
- Communications Director
- Director of Security
- Director of Nursing

Your central crisis communication team should be made up of those with diverse responsibilities and experience. This will lead to a more objective crisis communication plan. Additionally, a list of names should be compiled to be added to the crisis team depending on the issue. Ask team members to name replacement for themselves on the team if, for whatever reason, they are unavailable. Make sure you have home addresses and telephone numbers on the list. If team members do not carry beepers, request they install answering machines on their home telephones.

The best approach is to limit the number of spokespersons so they speak with one voice.

Designate a spokesperson.

This is a policy issue, and is handled effectively in different ways depending on the culture and management style of each organization. The best approach is to limit the number of spokespersons so they speak with one voice. The fewer the number of spokespersons, the easier it will be to communicate a coherent message and control the flow of information to your publics. Make sure your entire staff knows who the designated spokesperson(s) is and that all questions should be referred to that person(s).

Realize that all employees are spokespersons.

Always remember to address you "internal" publics first...your employees. Its always better to tell your people the news before they read it in the newspaper or see it on television. Further more, it is crucial that your employees are armed with the facts and are trained to refer all questions to the spokesperson.

Crises can usually be turned into opportunities. The essential factor is that from the first moment, the organization's leaders must look like they know what they're doing.

Notify the Crisis Communication Team and appoint a Crisis Team Manager.

It is important that you designate a manager for your crisis communication team and it is critical that situational leadership pass to this person as soon as the crisis begins, and that others in this organization will respect and respond to that leadership. Whoever it is, the manager must be designated at time when there is no crisis and everyone should be notified. At the time of a crisis, the entire team should be notified.

Gather the facts and assess the current condition of the crisis.

It is critical that the facts of the situation be known and it is crucial that this is done quickly before anyone speaks to the public. Create a fact sheet which contains all the information related to the situation. The crisis team manager should coordinate this task.

Create a fact sheet which contains all the information related to the situation.

Develop a crisis communication plan.

- Make sure the crisis communication team is aware of their responsibilities.
- Identify all audiences and how best to communicate with them.
- Prepare public statements.

Make sure the crisis communication team meets often so they are aware of their responsibilities during a crisis.

Address your staff and employees first. Your next, and almost simultaneous, communications targets should be those people affected by what happened (families of clients, staff etc.). Third, and still almost simultaneous should be the news media.

Refer to the fact sheet when preparing all public statements.



Process

Without an effective crisis communication plan, years of good public relations can go down the drain in weeks or even days.

Determine the best way to communicate with your audiences.

For urgent or complicated issues, a press conference is in order. Keep in mind that the press will evaluate whether or not a press conference is worth their time, and would appreciate receiving the information in some other way if possible. Other ways to consider: by fax, e-mail, hand-delivery, overnight mail, etc.

Re-establish relationships.

Soon after the crisis ends, you will want to reassure your publics, i.e. clients, families, staff and others in the community that the harmful effects have been minimized. Draft a press release and write to key audiences covering all aspects of the situation -- preparations against a recurrence, return to normal operations, a work of thanks to those who assisted during the crisis, etc.

Don't forget about your website!

Use your website to post press releases and other information you want made immediately available to your publics. Update your site frequently and remove information that is no longer relevant.

Evaluate the crisis communication plan.

After the crisis has passed, have a meeting with the crisis communication team to evaluate the effectiveness of your plan. If changes are made, make sure all affected parties are notified.

Soon after the crisis ends, you will want to reassure your publics.

Checklist #1

In a crisis, the first impulse may be to hide the facts. The second impulse might be to rush out an announcement before you have all the facts. Avoid both of these impulses by using the check lists below and remember to adhere to professional standards of confidentiality.

Use the Crisis Bulletin Check List to develop a fact sheet for all controversies, crises and emergencies:

- Name, address telephone of pertinent media contacts
- Nature of the controversy, crisis or emergency
- How the crisis began
- Approximate time and location of crisis (It may be helpful to create a time line.)
- How the crisis occurred
- Current condition of the crisis
- Who was involved
- Procedures for resolving the crisis
- When the crisis will be resolved
- Relevant regulatory and/or legal issues
- When additional facts will be available
- Name of spokesperson with home, mobile and office numbers
- General fact sheet about your organization
- Pay careful attention to any positive highlights that resulted from the crisis(acts of heroism etc.) that can be used to redirect the negative situation

In case of extreme emergency (i.e. death, injury, physical plant damage) you will need to develop a fact sheet with the following additional information:

- Number of injuries and/or deaths
- How the injuries or deaths occurred
- Current condition of injured clients or residents
- Names of injured or dead **after** appropriate notification of family has occurred
- Effect on continuing operations of your facility
- Extent and location of significant damage to your facility

Use this information to help you create a fact sheet.

Checklist
#2

Interview Strategies: Communicating with confidence will make your audience trust with you say.

Make your points early.

The beginning of an answer gets the most attention, so put your strongest point first. If you start with a long preamble, you may be interrupted before you reach your important message.

Be concise.

Summarize the essence of our message with a few simple, hard-hitting points.

Watch your language.

Avoid technicalities, professional buzzwords and abstractions and you will appear caring, not clinical.

Be positive.

Do not repeat the negative language in a question. Instead, turn the question around to make a positive point.

If asked about:	Respond with:
<i>Cheap treatment</i>	<i>affordable care</i>
<i>Danger</i>	<i>safety record</i>

Simplify statistics.

Make your numbers listener-friendly. Don't say an injury occurs in "27 percent of the population," say it occurs in "one out of four people."

Stay "on the record."

There is no such thing as "off the record." Don't say anything to a reporter that you don't want to see in a headline in tomorrow's newspaper.

Stick to your own story.

Do not be lead into presenting an opponent's side of an issue. Simply say, "I will let them speak for themselves. My view is..."

Don't guess.

If you don't know the answer, say so. Then promise to get the information as soon as possible.

Tell the truth.

You need not tell all you know about an issue, but never lie to the press. Stick to your fact sheet.



The Hot Seat:
How to
handle the
hostile
interviewer.

Multiple questions

Pick out the one or two questions for which you have the best responses, and calmly present your answers. Then ask, "What were your other questions?" and let the reporter ask the unanswered questions again.

Interruptions

Pause until the interviewer is finished with the interruption. Then say, "I'll be happy to address that in a moment. As I was saying..." and (quickly) finish your point.

Paraphrasing

Clearly say, "That's not what I said. What I said was..." and repeat your statement.

Negative introduction

Don't let the negative impression stand at the top of the show; the audience will assume you agree with it. When you are given your first opportunity to speak, calmly state, "There's something I'd like to correct," and politely correct the initial statement.

Inaccurate data

Graciously correct it, and move on to the positive point. If you do not recognize a fact stated by a reporter, do not assume it's accurate. Simply explain that you are unfamiliar with the data, and if the reporter will share it with you, you will be happy to review it and comment.

Skepticism

Stay focused and reaffirm the validity of your statement. Introduce another fact supporting your position or restate your original position.

Long pauses

Don't rush to fill lulls in the conversation. You may say something you will later regret. Calmly wait out the reporter, or say "I believe I've answered that question." What else do you wish to discuss?"

False charges

Immediately correct the false assumption of guilt without restating the charge by saying, "That isn't true." Then describe your positive view of the situation.

Checklist
#4

Broadcast Interviews:
Project a professional image and make your audience comfortable with how you deliver your message.

Master the short answer.

Answer questions in 30 seconds or less. Each reply should be a self-contained message, independent of any prior statement or of any later comment. This will make it easier for radio and television to use your response and decrease the change that your statement will be edited.

Speak with power.

Vary your pitch, rate and volume to add interest to your message. Move quickly through ideas the audience understands, then slow down for new, complex information. Tell stories in a quick, relaxed manor.

Practice.

Rehearsing your message aloud is especially important for broadcast interviews. Use a tape or video recorder to critique your presentation style.

Be enthusiastic.

Let your natural enthusiasm come through. If you behave as though your information deserves attention, the audience will listen.

Dress for the part.

Dress professionally. Avoid distracting stripes, plaids and large or sparkling jewelry. Wear glasses if you do normally.

Make eye contact.

Unless directed otherwise, don't look directly into the camera. Look directly at the interviewer to project a sincere image.

Position yourself effectively.

Sit comfortably in your chair, lean forward slightly to appear more assertive. Don't limit your gestures by leaning on your arm, locking your hands or putting them in your pockets. Let your gestures flow naturally, keeping them in front of you rather than to the side where they can disappear off camera.

Think like a star.

Assume you are on camera at all times, not just when you are talking. Don't assume you are off the air until you are told that you are.

**Checklist
#5**

Find out what the interviewer wants.

What specifically about the situation interests the reporter? Who is the intended audience? How much background does the reporter have in long term care or senior housing issues? How has the reporter covered long term care or your organization in previous stories?

Get the details for radio and television.

For a broadcast interview, ask if the show is live or taped and how long the interview will last on the air. Discover what arrangements are desired for visual treatments.

Review your position.

Take time to frame your responses carefully. Refer to Interview Strategies Checklist #2.

Create your own agenda.

Write down your important messages – the main ideas you want to get across in an interview.

Play devil's advocate.

Anticipate tough questions and prepare straight forward answers. Look for a way to bridge from negative questions to the positive points you have prepared. Understand your answers and be prepared for follow-up questions.

Know your answers inside and out.

Practice your answers aloud instead of simply reviewing your notes. Prepare written documentation for the reporter to review later.

Prepare yourself for success by training for an interview in advance.
