



Keys to Inspiring Confidence During the “Critical Hour”

The **ONLY** Guide That Outlines Who, What, When, Here, How, and Why You Communicate During The First Hour of a Crisis



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INTRODUCTION

The more quickly and prudently you can begin to communicate during a crisis, the more likely you are to **gain control of the pace and content of all external communications**, be able to state your key messages clearly and firmly and avoid any misconception that you're trying to hide something with your silence. In addition, you will be the information authority that your stakeholders expect.

Keys to Inspiring Confidence During the Critical Hour is the only guide that outlines the highest priority communication activities that should occur during the first — the most critical — hour of a crisis. This information is drawn from personal experiences that Heather McGowan, Principal of Sounding Board Marketing & Communications, had as a public information officer of a medium-sized school district, as well as from crisis consultation provided to clients.

Effective communication during a crisis is an opportunity to gain and retain stakeholder confidence. The sooner that your organization responds with accurate and organized information, as well as compassion and reassurance, the more confidence your stakeholders will have in your organization and its leadership during and after the present crisis, and before the next crisis hits.

The information presented in this guide is highly effective when used concurrently with an updated crisis communication plan that outlines how communications will be deployed (and who is responsible) in the event of a crisis. Take a moment to review organization's crisis communication plan — should you need additional resources on developing a thorough crisis communication plan please contact Sounding Board Marketing & Communications at hvmcgowan@sounding-board.net or 916.673.8868.

Some things to keep in mind as you use this guide:

1. **It's free**—please feel free to share it with others!
2. This guide can also be used with a single department or for a single program, small organizations, or large organizations.
3. You may also reprint the text contained in this free guide in your own writings — like your website, blog, or newsletter — **as long as you credit Heather McGowan of Sounding Board Marketing & Communications as the author and link back to the website www.sounding-board.net.**

If you need any assistance with your plan, please contact Sounding Board Marketing & Communications at 916.673.8868 or hvmcgowan@sounding-board.net.

INTRODUCTION

The more quickly and prudently you can begin to communicate during a crisis, the more likely you are to gain control of the pace and content of all external communications, be able to state your key messages clearly and firmly and avoid any misperception that you're trying to hide something with your silence.

1. Develop reassuring holding statements.

Speculating is the worst thing to do during a crisis. Developing holding statements that can be conveyed to and repeated by your key stakeholders will help address reporters' questions and alleviate non-communication professionals' concerns about the pressure to answer the still-yet-unanswerable questions. In addition, incorporating your organization's values and commitments into the holding statements will help to inspire confidence in your organization.

Here are some examples holding statements that you can develop before a crisis and use when training your key communicators:

- ✓ "The situation is evolving, and we will keep everyone updated as we receive more information..."
- ✓ "Information is still arriving, and we will have another update by [time]..."
- ✓ "This is what we have confirmed, and more details may emerge as the investigation continues..."
- ✓ "XYZ School District is committed to the safety of its students and staff and will cooperate with all authorities during the investigation..."
- ✓ "We have implemented our crisis response plan, which places the highest priority on the health and safety of our students and staff..."
- ✓ "Our hearts and minds are with those who are in harm's way, and we will continue to seek answers as the investigation continues..."
- ✓ "We will be supplying additional information when it is available and posting it on our website and social media networks..."

2. Identify key messages, and keep them simple and memorable.

With holding statements available as a starting point, the Crisis Communications Team must continue developing the crisis-specific messages required for any given situation. The team already knows, categorically, what type of information its stakeholders are looking for.

What should those stakeholders know about the crisis?

Keep it simple — have no more than three main messages for all stakeholders and, as necessary, some audience-specific messages for individual groups of stakeholders.

Remember to keep messages simple— during a crisis, cognitive skills biologically decrease as people take on a “fight or flight” response; simple, easy-to-understand and memorable messages will be most effective in these circumstances.

3. Contact all key stakeholders (board members, staff, parents, media, key community leaders).

Maintain three consistent messages that will be conveyed to the stakeholders, and determine if certain stakeholders need to receive other messages (i.e., board of education-reminders on communicating with parents and the media; staff- additional directions, communicating with students and the media; parents-student reunion locations).

4. Use email judiciously.

Using as one mode to convey key messages? Definitely. For decision-making discussions? Stick to the phone, conference calling, and/or teleconferencing, and utilize email for discussion summaries.

Email has a delayed response, can be misinterpreted, is subject to not working during power outages, and ... is entirely subject to the Freedom of Information Act requests, which can derail your well-written and positioned messages the instant the media gets a hold of the “decision-making” discussions, in the midst of editorial remarks, panicked responses and more by your organization’s key decision-makers.

This will help ensure that the confidence that you inspire in the Critical Hour is not undone in the aftermath of the crisis. Prepare in advance, so that key communicators and responders will have their phones/teleconferencing/ other non-email mode of communication ready when a crisis unfolds.

5. Leverage social media...

Chances are, early reports of the crisis will be reported via social media from traditional media channels or from those actually involved in the crisis, whether it's a YouTube video of the incident, or through individuals posting on their personal social media accounts.

Therefore, once your initial messages are established, post them at the same time as when all other communications are released. If your organization does not have a social media presence, then utilize the traditional media as well as trusted leaders (organizational administrators, school board members, key community leaders, other organization-related leaders) to post your messages to their social media accounts.

Be very clear in your instructions to them to avoid editing, adding additional comments, etc, to your official message, as they are being entrusted to convey this information to ensure clear communication. *It is advisable to coordinate this well before any crises occur to answer questions and avoid conflict in the midst of a crisis.*

6. ...And engage multiple ways to disseminate information.

Your stakeholders will be looking at every available outlet for information about the crisis, starting with those that are connected to the source of the crisis.

For example in a school district, if the crisis happens at one of your schools, ensure that either you or the key crisis communicators at the school (both, would be ideal) can post your key messages onto their website and social media networks, because parents will likely look at their sources before they look at your district's sources.

Be sure to leverage all available communication channels: autodialer, email, your website, your schools' websites, email, social media networks (see more in #5, above), media, text/instant messaging. The more ways that to convey and repeat your message = the more opportunities to inspire confidence in your organization.

7. Be the information authority: Let people know what you know and what to expect.

Putting yourself in the position of describing the steps ahead — also known as “anticipatory guidance” — will increase your stakeholders’ confidence in your organization.

For example, when faced with a question like “How many people were killed?” Instead of stating, “We don’t know what the body count is” state: “We won’t be able to get access to the bodies until tomorrow at the earliest.”

Always state what you do know, versus what you don’t, otherwise they will go looking for answers from the person who says or acts like they are the authority, and they will lose confidence in your organization.

8. Be accessible.

Both you and your superintendent need to be accessible during a crisis, physically, emotionally and psychologically. Unless your physical safety will be compromised, each of you need to be physically present for press conferences and other public statements.

If there is a confirmed physical threat, this needs to be explained to the media and public to explain why either or both of you cannot be physically present. Otherwise, this will give the impression of a cowardly approach to the situation.

Also remember that accessibility also pertains to ensuring that messages are translated and are accessible to those with disabilities; that translators are available at media and public events and that the staging areas are accessible to people with disabilities.

9. Be patient, compassionate, empathetic, and courteous.

Of course, it’s easy to agree with this statement now, before a crisis occurs, but, when the strain of a crisis, multiple silly questions are asked, and the pressure is on, patience, compassion and courtesy can easily find themselves in the backseat to impatience and brusque answers that do not convey any empathy. Just as crisis can lead to opportunity, remember that **there are incredible opportunities to inspire confidence through patience, compassion, empathy and courtesy**. Just remember to keep taking deep breaths.

10. Address inaccurate or misleading reporting.

If you become aware of inaccurate or misleading reporting (either by the media, in social media, or through another source) during the first hour of a crisis, address it immediately — don't wait until you provide your next update and assume the information will be corrected.

You may not be physically available to check the initial reports — therefore, utilize one of your crisis response team members to be responsible for checking all news and other updates.

The more minutes that the inaccurate or misleading information is available, the more opportunities will occur for that information to increase in credibility — and undermine the credibility of your future messages.