

Internal Crisis Communications: The Inside Track



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When a crisis threatens a nonprofit mission, top leaders instinctively focus on what to say to the rapidly encroaching outside world. A community-serving nonprofit may attract attention from far and wide when a disaster, scandal or tragedy strikes. Yet one of the most important steps to surviving and thriving while in crisis, is paying careful and caring attention to the needs of insiders. Effective internal crisis communication will assist your team in managing itself during a crisis.

The November 2016 edition of *HR Magazine*, published by SHRM, includes an insightful article on the topic of internal crisis communications. In “Rapid Response,” Novid Parsi writes that “...executing internal communications can help ensure worker safety, minimize damage to your brand, return your workforce productivity and build trust among employees.” Insiders—including staff and volunteers—are more than a valuable asset in a crisis: they are vital partners in returning the organization to good health.

Putting Staff First in a Crisis

Consider the following tips for keeping personnel close, connected and informed during a crisis.

- **Be consistent.** Sending different messages to staff at various ranks and levels in your nonprofit could backfire in a crisis. Save time and unproductive energy by bringing your team closer during a crisis. Send clear, consistent and timely messages to all staff: what’s happening, how they can help, and where to find the help they need. A crisis can inspire a sense of shared ownership in your nonprofit’s mission, but not if your actions create factions, or ‘haves’ and ‘have not’s.’
- **Be factual.** Explain what you know, acknowledge uncertainties, and be sincere. Your staff don’t expect you to psychic or all-knowing; they do expect, however, that you will be truthful, timely and trustworthy.
- **Be proactive.** Identify possible crisis team members before a crisis hits; choose staff from different departments of the organization who bring varied skills sets and temperaments to the table. Work with the crisis team now to discuss practical ways to deal with an emergency or crisis.
- **Be practical.** Many crisis teams get bogged down in imagining improbable crisis scenarios and creating convoluted plans based narrowly on a specific type of crisis (e.g., active shooter, hurricane, etc.). Focus instead on identifying the most important ‘to do’ items applicable to any crisis, such as: confirming that staff are safe, notifying stakeholders of an imminent danger, communicating quickly with teams using multiple communications tools, and summoning expert external resources.
- **Be reflective.** In the wake of a crisis or near miss, you will be eager to move on. But before moving far

and away from the vortex, pause to reflect on and evaluate your crisis team's handling of the crisis. Ask: how well did planned communications strategies work? What unanticipated obstacles prevented the ideal implementation of our response plan? What valuable lessons were learned during the crisis? What changes in planning should be implemented today to fortify our mission for the 'next time?'

- **Be thankful.** A crisis may lead you to feel overwhelmed, underprepared, and ill-equipped. But a crisis often reveals powerful strengths in an organization—from the deep commitment of staff and volunteers, to the generous spirit of your donors and other stakeholders. Always take the time to sincerely thank members of your team for their time, their goodwill, and their tenacity to work together, to serve and to keep your mission alive.

By connecting with your internal stakeholders during a crisis, you'll keep everyone in mission-support mode while quelling one of their greatest fears: not being at the table. Keep your staff and volunteers informed and live by John D. Rockefeller's wise words: "Next to doing the right thing, the most important thing is to let people know you are doing the right thing."

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