

Communication Through A Crisis

Checklist

District _____ Building _____ Date _____

* These are suggestions. Please take these ideas and develop them to fit the culture of your school and your community.

Crisis_Communication_Objectives: (Review 4 times a year)

- **Prevent the crisis from happening!**
- Minimize the impact of a crisis as best we can.
- Minimize the amount of time spent focused on the crisis - Internally and by others.
- Regain control of the situation and the conversation as quickly as possible.

Communication_Before_a_Crisis

- Organize a "what if" brainstorming session with others. Come up with "what if" scenarios about potential crisis situations and write a general procedure for responding to the "what if" crisis.
- Select crisis management and crisis communication teams. Who is responsible for communicating with the media during a crisis? Everyone in your organization should know the members of the crisis communication and crisis management teams.
- Determine who and how the school or district will provide information during a crisis about:
 - What happened?
 - Who is in charge?
 - Has the situation been contained?
 - Are the victims being helped?
 - Why did this happen?
 - Did you have forewarning?
 - Identify key audiences.
- Determine to whom you want to communicate.
 - Prioritize this list!

5. Develop tools for communicating information:

- An emergency Web site, linked to the district homepage, with regular updates and links to resources.
- An email listserv to stakeholders who must be contacted regularly, such as staff, media, parents and elected officials.
- Translation services.
- Electronic message from school and district offices to provide the latest information.
- A daily fact sheet.
- Letters or emails to parents at affected school and other schools in district.
- Frequently asked questions and answers that can be distributed to media and put on the crisis web site.

- Identify tactics for answering media questions, sharing accurate and up-to-the-minute information and developing positive working relationships with the media:
- Know who to contact and how to reach all local media. Think about how your community gets its news.
- Develop template news releases and advisories that can be quickly filled in and updated with information.
- Follow all district policies and state laws when releasing information to the media.
- Have your spokesperson field media questions and requests.
- Craft key messages about school safety and talking points specific to the emergency or crisis.
- Identify who will provide guidance to teachers on media interviews.
- Establish policies regarding media presence on school grounds and in buildings.
- Manage media coverage of benchmark dates. Create a letter or email that encourages media responsibility.

Communication During a Crisis

- Gather information. Facts should be routinely updated;
 - Rumors should be verified or exposed as myths.
 - Miscommunication heightens during a crisis and can be

exaggerated by half-truths, distortions, or negative perceptions.

- Develop messages and then communicate the messages and the facts.
 - Develop a few clear, simple messages for the media.
 - The message should communicate concern about what is happening and explain what the organization is doing to address the crisis.
 - In a crisis that involves physical harm or a health risk to the public, provide guidance to the public and get the public the information they need, quickly.

- Communicate to key internal audiences
 - Develop a preliminary statement — what's happened, what's the immediate response.
 - Develop a script for people answering phone calls.
 - Disseminate accurate information to staff, district leadership, district communications department and other schools.

- Communicate with families
 - Initiate crisis plan parent notification system.
 - Determine how, when and where families will be reunited.
 - Begin external communications.
 - Communicate with appropriate state and local agencies.
 - Contact school district attorney.

- Manage media relations
 - Establish a media briefing area.
 - Work with law enforcement to set a designated area and perimeter for media.
 - Identify the spokesperson (site- based or district official).
 - Develop an initial media release.
 - Provide school and district fact sheets that include basic information about the school and school district.
 - Hold a press briefing in conjunction with law enforcement.
 - Control rumors by getting facts out as soon as information is verified.
 - Take into account that personal communication tools, such as cell phone and text messaging, allow students to contact media

and others directly.

6. Contact mental health support (Ask these people ahead of time!)
 - Request counselors and other trained professionals from neighboring schools.
 - Contact district crisis response team.
 - Contact local mental health agencies or centers.
 - Contact state and national agencies that can provide immediate support to students and staff.

7. Plan for communications command center to be operational in the next day or two.
 - Determine best location based on crisis site. Consult with school principal, facilities manager, security and law enforcement.
 - Develop a list of supplies that will be needed at the command post.
 - Assign a volunteer coordinator who will solicit communications experts and volunteers from local, state and national sources, if needed, to help with media relations, answering phones, making copies, etc.

8. Establish communications channels for internal and external audiences.
 - Initiate phone tree and email to staff, students and parents. Carefully craft a script with what is known and not known to share with students and families.

9. Update regularly as new information becomes available. Include a phone number where people with questions can reach a "real" person.
 - Update the district and school web sites with information about the crisis. Cross-reference hotline numbers and provides links to other resources, such as mental health support.
 - Set up an information hotline staffed by central office personnel or trained volunteers from the teacher's association, retired administrators, etc. Provide a script and answers to frequently asked questions. Have operators log calls and keep track of new questions that arise.
 - Develop fact sheet template to be used throughout the crisis. Send fact sheet electronically to internal and external audiences daily at a

- set time.
- Send group email. Send an email to staff at the affected site and all other central and school sites in the district with the latest information about what happened and what is being done. Provide information on how to get updates through the web site and hotline.
 - Deal with rumors. Make sure all central and school-based staffs have
 - Provide scripts for office personnel on answering questions or giving directions to the staging area or other important
- Manage media relations.
 - The media will want ongoing information.
 - Be available, open and honest.
 - Designate a spokesperson that can serve throughout the crisis. If the school district has a communications office, it's ideal for the director to serve as spokesperson. Determine carefully whether the principal, superintendent or school board members will make public statements and who is most appropriate. Consider:
 - Is the official emotionally ready and able to give a statement?
 - Does the community/media expect a statement?
 - A high-level official to take an active, visible communications role?
 - What are the legal considerations and long-term implications?
 - Which official is appropriate? Who has the most information and represents the district best in the public arena?

Communication After a Crisis!

Continued healing requires addressing the aftermath of the crisis, including how to handle long-term mental health needs and the ongoing process of recovery.

Communication with staff, students, parents, the community and media is just as critical after the emergency or crisis has passed.

Long-term communications and media strategies

1. Communications strategies

- Continue to provide regular communications and realize that the need for updated information continues in the aftermath of a crisis.
- Update web sites, voice mails, phone scripts and fact sheets as needed.
- Maintain a master list of frequently asked questions and answers.
- Meet as needed with key stakeholders to identify questions, quell rumors and provide accurate and timely information.
- Media strategies
 - Convey a message of resilience, continued healing and a return to normalcy when working with the media.
 - Issue media advisories about memorial events open to the public, anniversary dates, fundraising or donations, etc.
- Managing media coverage of benchmark dates
- The media will cover benchmark events, such as the first anniversary. For special events such as anniversary dates, establish a media area to determine where the media will set up cameras so as not to intrude on the ceremony. Create a perimeter for photographers and satellite trucks. Set guidelines on still and video cameras in the building. Decide if you will have a media pool (selected media representatives who share information) or allow all media to attend the event.
- It is helpful to meet with the media in advance to establish mutually beneficial guidelines. Ask the media to:
 - Refrain from replaying or reprinting images of the crisis. Showing disturbing pictures has the potential to re-traumatize victims.
 - Honor the victims and not glorify the perpetrators of violence.
 - Respect the privacy of those who do not want to be interviewed.
 - Consider a "no fly" zone over an out- door memorial service.
- Be proactive about pitching story ideas to the media that promote hope and healing. Develop a list of students and faculty willing to talk to the media.