



What to Do Part Three: Practice 10 Tips for Crisis Communication

We get it. Right now it seems like many things are spinning out of control. These are challenging times—especially for those of you who are working constantly to support women and children, ensure equitable access to education and healthcare, close gaps and increase opportunity for everyone. **The work you are doing is critical and you are not alone.**

When everything is up in the air, it's hard to know where to focus, when to push harder, and how to protect your organization and your work. ACS is offering this three-part series, "What To Do," that includes tips and tools to help you keep calm, concentrate on what matters, and take positive actions to keep your work moving forward.

In times of uncertainty, everything can feel like a crisis. But understanding what's really a crisis and how to communicate effectively during one can make the difference between smoothly navigating forward or being tossed to the wind. If you already have a crisis communication plan in hand, congratulations on your forward-thinking preparation! If you'd like to be prepared for a crisis before it happens, check out the [ACS Crisis Communication Strategy Worksheet](#) to develop a full crisis communication plan. If you've not had an opportunity and a crisis is now at hand, read on for 10 tips for crisis communication.

1. Don't panic.

Crises come and go, but your organization's overall mission and vision won't change because of them, and your communication should be rooted there.

2. Identify and understand the crisis.

Not everything unsettling is a crisis. For example, learning that you will lose a significant funding source in a few months is stressful, but likely not an immediate communication crisis. A sudden funding freeze that requires immediate layoffs would be a crisis that requires an immediate response. Evaluate a situation to determine if it's time to step into crisis mode. What happened (or is about to happen)? Is the information you have credible? Who is/was involved and who will it affect? How quickly? What additional facts do you need to know? Is it something within or beyond your control? What are you doing or will you do in response?

3. Gather a crisis team.

This is a small group whose short-term task is to manage through the crisis. This team ideally includes the CEO, relevant senior leaders, a board leader from inside the organization, and maybe a public relations consultant or legal counsel. This team should determine how you will handle all aspects of the crisis—including what success looks like once the crisis has passed.

4. Identify a spokesperson and media protocols.

During a crisis, it's best to have only one person from your crisis team designated to speak with the media and stakeholders. This helps keep messages and audience attention appropriately focused and ensures that your messaging is consistent.

5. Identify internal and external audiences that need to hear from you.

Board members, staff, donors, and those to whom your organization provides services are all important audiences for crisis communication. Others may include policymakers or other government officials, law enforcement, public health officials, and/or specific populations within your community, such as immigrant or religious groups. Remember, the media may be the first to contact you during a crisis, but they are rarely the most important audience. Always put key stakeholders first.

6. Create a stakeholder communication plan.

Once you have determined each of your stakeholder audiences, create a plan to reach them. We recommend a plan that identifies the power or interest each group holds with relation to the crisis, and what is most important to them. It should also include how you can best reach them, and how often to do so.

7. Buy time and credibility with "holding statements."

Of course, you'll want to create key messages to use in a crisis, but that requires time, while calls from the media and other key stakeholders may come in before you are ready to share. Start by developing "holding statements" to issue quickly. These can be as simple as, "Our organization is aware of the situation and will issue a statement within two hours," or "Check our website for updates." Be sure to follow through on whatever your holding statements promise.

8. Develop key messages.

Review the facts, determine your organizational response, and draft key messages to share with your audiences. (Our [Message Creation Checklist](#) can help.) Aim for three crisis-specific messages that are based on facts and modify them as needed for various stakeholder groups. Consider the various messaging forms you might need for distribution—an audience on social media may need a shorter version than one you reach through email.

9. Monitor the conversation.

Establish a system to monitor conversation about your crisis on social media, as well as any direct feedback or inquiries you receive from stakeholders. (There are automated free services such as Google Alerts to help with this.) Respond to negative messages with key messages that remain consistent and focused. Don't take the bait from those seeking to add to the negative chatter.

10. Keep your board informed.

Even board members who are not part of your crisis response team will play a critical role in crisis management. Be sure to keep them informed so that they can provide strategic guidance, minimize legal and reputational risk, and quickly authorize the allocation of funds if needed.

It's always best to plan ahead for a potential crisis, when possible, but you can't predict everything—especially during unsettled and uncertain times. Keeping your head and following the steps above can help ensure you emerge post-crisis with your mission and reputation intact and ready to continue your important work.

Need more help?

It's never too late to use the [ACS Crisis Communications Strategy Worksheet](#), and the entire ACS team is here to guide you through a crisis or a crisis planning session. Contact one of our team members toll free at 1-877-372-0166 or visit our website at advocacyandcommunication.org



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