



# THE ART OF MANAGING COMMUNICATION IN A CRISIS



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## UNICEF Handbook

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Twenty seconds, professor, and no long words*

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Warning to an expert before a BBC interview\*

When vital information needs to be delivered, the media plays a crucial role. But the media these days means different things to different people. It is not only television or a newspaper. It can be an internet social network, a telephone hotline or a village bulletin board. As long as it creates pathways for communication, it is relevant and useful.

This handbook will help you and your organisation to identify, deliver and assess your most important messages in times of crisis. It will also help choose which media is best for a specific emergency in times of stress. In addition, it will aid in developing an internal communications structure on how to prepare for an emergency; cover an emergency; and, organise the aftermath of an emergency.

Chapters 1-3 outline the construction of a communications team. Chapters 4 and 5 look at how to define a message and who to use to deliver that message, Chapters 6- 9 offer details about getting ready for an emergency; how to handle the emergency; and, how to organise coverage of the aftermath. Chapter 10 looks at an array of problems and how they may be solved. Chapter 11 offers suggestions for correcting errors and Chapter 12 concludes with how to operate closure. The guidance should be adaptable to local regions or cultures.

Of course, in some circumstances it may prove impossible to carry out certain of the steps, but overall, hopefully, this handbook should offer a solid outline on what can be done to anticipate and handle an emergency.

*\*quoted from Who's Misunderstanding Whom, published by The Economic And Social Research Council, UK (2000)*

# CHAPTER 1: ROLE OF A COMMUNICATION TEAM

## 1.1 UNDERSTANDING RESPONSIBILITIES

A communication team must understand its responsibilities which include the goals set out by its leadership. These goals include

- building or restoring public trust
- delivering key messages to the public
- delivering key messages to the internal organisation structure
- responding to public requests for information
- responding to media requests for information

Responsibilities should be set out in a clear communication plan. A team member must understand the exact role he/she plays in a communication team and the leadership structure.

## 1.2 UNDERSTANDING THE DEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION PLAN

The department plan will have in place the approach, preparation and practice of a crisis plan. It is essential that each member of the team has a firm grasp of the communication plan and carries out his/her duties. A team member must understand the management structure in a crisis. He/she must have access to an up to date contact list and a media priority list for an emergency. A team member must be aware of changes to the plan after evaluation and revision.

## 1.3 UNDERTAKING TRAINING AND EVALUATION

Members of a communication team must take part in training and evaluation of their awareness of their responsibilities. They must know what their roles are in normal working conditions, an emerging crisis, during a crisis and after a crisis. They must understand the line management and who is responsible during various periods of a crisis. They must understand the most effective forms of communication for different situations, different targets and different media. Training should include exercises that carry out duties according to the department's communication plan. Members should be open to evaluation and be able to evaluate what is best practice under a variety of circumstances.

# CHAPTER 2: ROLE OF A PRESS OFFICER

## 2.1 DEVELOPING AN OVERARCHING PLAN

The press officer must deliver a comprehensive plan that entails these time phases:

- Non emergency phase
- Getting ready for an emergency (anticipation and preparedness)
- An emergency
- An aftermath of an emergency
- Assessment period

The plan must be understood and approved by relevant management and, once cleared, become a key element for training. It also should be available to key partners. The plan must be open to evaluation and revision. Development of a communication plan includes:

- Responsibilities of all members of a communication team
- Identification of who to contact and when to contact internal management, the press, key partners and the public about a situation.
- Identification of media outlets
- Defining how to organise contacts and information files for access by the internal structure, the media and the public
- Training of all staff within the team
- Delegating use of technical equipment

## 2.2 DEVELOPING AN EMERGENCY 24/7 MEDIA PLAN

When a crisis emerges, there must be a comprehensive emergency plan ready and approved. It must be available and understood by the communication team. The press officer must devise staff cover 24 hours per day seven days a week (known as 24/7) with a roster in place. There can be no down time. Developing a 24/7 plan includes constant evaluation and relevant revision. It also includes new training based on any changes. Development of the plan includes liaison with other agencies so they understand the roll-out of the plan.

## 2.3 OVERSEEING TRAINING

Since change occurs, training is essential and continual. The team must understand:

- Individual roles during normal working conditions; run-up to an emergency; the emergency itself and after the emergency.
- The communication plan
- Lines of internal communication
- Preparation to become a department spokesperson if necessary.
- Continual assessment of training needs
- Relevant use of technical equipment

## 2.4 TRACKING ENQUIRIES

There must a plan in place to track all enquiries. This can be as simple as a whiteboard in the departmental newsroom or an electronic worksheet. Both reveal to all colleagues when a query has been taken, its origins and what is being done about it. Queries from the media should be prioritised and the department should identify at any given time which media plays the most important role in informing the public about a specific subject. Prior to a crisis, there should be a worksheet in place that lists all media and contact numbers.

# CHAPTER 3: ROLE OF A LEAD SPOKESPERSON

## 3.1 UNDERSTANDING KEY MESSAGES

A lead spokesperson is the public voice of the organisation. It may not be the senior person but it will be the person who can best communicate key messages to all media. The person in this role must understand these messages in order to deliver information to the public through the media. He/She must be properly briefed and be able to take in vital points and deliver them- sometimes under great stress- so the greatest number of people understand them. This entails training.

## 3.2 DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR ALL MEDIA

A lead spokesperson is selected to simplify the flow of information and minimise confusing and conflicting messages. The person must be open to:

- Training
- Constructive feedback
- Altering self-perceived strengths to improve delivery of key messages
- Delivering key messages in a brief window of time
- Working with broadcast, print, online media and at live events

Some main points about dealing with a crisis:

- Stay on message with agreed key points
- Never go off the record
- Do not use jargon or technical language
- Correct media errors immediately
- Admit mistakes and shoulder responsibility on behalf of the organisation
- Focus on known facts
- Avoid humour because it can be misinterpreted
- Refer to a World Health Organisation recommendation known as 27/9/3: ie, be prepared to give the facts in 27 words, 9 seconds or three bullet points.

## 3.3 PUBLICLY REPRESENTING THE ORGANISATION

A lead spokesperson must never let a personal opinion invade the flow of information. He/she must be aware of non-verbal signals that can be misinterpreted. For instance, different cultures perceive certain gestures or body language in different ways. The lead spokesperson must be perceived as honest, accurate, accessible and working with the public and media to disseminate information. He/she must be open to media training and constructive comments.

## 3.4 ACCEPTING OTHERS MAY BE MORE RELEVANT

There will come a time when other people are more relevant. They may have more expertise on a given subject. They may have experienced an element of the crisis that illustrates a key message. Or the person may have strengths in a particular media that makes him/her a better lead spokesperson for disseminating information. A vital element of the job is to accept that others can take over the spotlight to help the organisation.

# CHAPTER 4: PACKAGING THE MESSAGE

## 4.1 UNDERSTANDING KEY MESSAGES

Key messages agreed in advance within the team must form the basis of any effective communication. They must be understood by the media, the public and internal staff. Key messages can take the form of the overarching message, followed by supporting information such as safety tips, statements from an expert or vital facts about perceived dangers.

## 4.2 DELIVERING KEY MESSAGES

Key messages must be clear and simple. They must be devoid of jargon or technical language. It is important that each key message be supported by extra information to add context and background facts to the point being made. Once key messages are identified, they can form the basis of all types of communication whether it emanates from a press conference, a public meeting, a press release or a broadcast interview. Agreement of key messages means different spokespeople in different locations can deliver the same information. All member of the communication team must be aware of changes to key messages as the crisis changes. Some vital points:

- Keep to a maximum of 3 key messages
- Know your audience and media outlets
- Pitch the messages to a 12 year old child to avoid misunderstanding
- Be able to limit key messages to the 27/9/3 principle
- Be able to expand with supporting information if time allows
- Create an evaluating process to gauge success of key message delivery

## 4.3 CREATING A CULTURE OF ACCURACY AND HONESTY

The public voice of the organisation- the lead spokesperson- must be and must be perceived as accurate, honest and accessible. Be quick to correct misinformation currently in the public domain or media and correct your own organisation's unintentional errors. Never be drawn into media speculation; only state what is based on certainty.

## 4.4 CONTROLLING MESSAGE OUTPUT

It is important to control key messages. Before an interview, ask what the questions are to see how they fit into a key message strategy. Also find out basic facts such as the journalist's name, his/her employer and the knowledge the journalist possesses of the situation. If questions during an interview or press conference go 'off message,' become aggressive or are based on wrong facts, use a bridge statement to get back to your own message. Two sample bridges:

- 'I think what is important here is ...'
- 'The public should understand that...'

Delivery success can depend on speed. By hesitating, a factual vacuum can be created which will allow bad information or opinion to fill a void. By publicizing key messages quickly, the template for vital messages will be created. This will help public understanding rather than add to a confusing combination of assumed fact, bias or rumour.

# CHAPTER 5: IDENTIFYING MEDIA OUTLETS

## 5.1 PRIORITISING THE MEDIA

Different types of media serve different situations. Television can reach into many homes instantly but it may be prone to technical breakdown in an emergency. Newspapers may offer a wave of background but are irrelevant to those who cannot read. Sometimes 'low-tech' is best: a village bulletin board, a public meeting or traditional folk arts.

Some forms of communication are one-way: there is no channel for audience feedback or questions. Sometimes two-way media may be best in the run up or after an event. These can include chat rooms, blogs, radio call-in shows or local workshops. A strategy should include a profile of all media to understand which media is best for an organisation's goals of audience reach.

## 5.2 CREATING MEDIA PROFILES

Information on all media should be prepared and ready to use. It must be adaptable to review and change. The media form should:

- Create categories (print, television, radio, web, traditional, etc)
- List the individual media organisations within these categories
- Identify contacts within the media organisation
- Identify its one or two way capabilities
- Identify its strengths and weaknesses

## 5.3 MAKING CHOICES

When a crisis emerges, it is best to find the most appropriate form of getting a message across to the public via the media. Each outlet has its own inbuilt strengths and weaknesses. Think of these factors:

- How the message fits the media
- The ability to control the message
- The target audience
- The need for speed
- Its one-way or two-way potential

## 5.4 USING APPROPRIATE MEDIA FOR KEY EVENTS

Each form of media has particular strengths and weaknesses appropriate in different situations.

### Press conference:

- **Strengths:** It is immediate and up to date. It gives access to all media and offers individual contact and interviews with the lead spokesperson. It can be transmitted live globally.
- **Weaknesses:** It is a one way form of communication. It can open up the spokesperson or experts to aggressive questioning. It must be fully organised before it opens to the media. It must be tightly controlled by a chair.

### Television:

- **Strengths:** It can be broadcast live and reaches mass audiences immediately with the most up-to-date information
- **Weaknesses:** It is only accessible to those with the technology. It is dependent on the technology working. Once pre-recorded, it is in the hands of editorial staff and messages can be mismanaged

or heavily edited. It is usually a one-way form of communication. The visual presentation skills of a spokesperson may have a negative impact on key messages

### Radio:

- **Strengths:** It can be broadcast live. It can channel a great deal of information via the spoken word. It can contain the most up to date information. Community radio can broadcast in local dialect. Live radio can be a good form of two-way communication with chat shows or phone-in shows.
- **Weaknesses:** It is difficult to monitor who is listening. Pre-recorded material is in the control of editorial staff and can be edited

### Newspapers:

- **Strengths:** It can provide large amounts of background information including statistics and safety facts. Larger publications may include specialist correspondents with a dependable and detailed range of knowledge.
- **Weaknesses:** It is a one-way form of communication. It is not immediate. It is dependent on being able to read.

### Internet:

- **Strengths:** A powerful form of worldwide two-way communication with blogs, webcasts, chat rooms and social networking creating large and new areas for interaction. Up-to-date information can be controlled and included instantly
- **Weaknesses:** The audience has to be conversant with the technology or able to access websites. Social network sites and chatrooms can be open to uninformed comment.

### Local events:

These can take a large variety of forms from speeches in town halls to folk art presentations.

- **Strengths:** It can be constructed according to local cultures. It is an effective form of two-way communication where problems and solutions can be quickly aired. It is not dependent on technology.
- **Weaknesses:** It is not immediate and cannot deliver messages to a mass audience. It is better suited before or after a crisis.

## 5.5 REVIEWING THE MEDIA LIST

It is essential to constantly review relations with the media. Some elements to consider:

- Is that specific media relevant to the public?
- Is that specific media relevant to your goals?
- Is it accurate?
- Does it target the same audience you are aiming at?
- Has it changed its one-way/two-way status?
- Following a crisis it is best to review the list
  - Broadcast: Were key messages broadcast through news items. What were the audience figures. Were messages heavily edited
  - Print: What percentage of newspapers covered the key messages and what were their circulations
  - Web: Were key messages taken up and how many 'hits' were on that site
  - Traditional: How many people engaged with folk arts, open meetings, Were they relevant to a specific community

# CHAPTER 6: GETTING READY

## 6.1 CREATING AN EMERGENCY PLAN

An emergency communication plan must be part of the overall communications plan. It must be in place and ready to use at all times. It must be understood by all staff and partners. As an element of the overall communications plan, it must be approved by management. Staff must be trained on its use and aware of changes.

## 6.2 GETTING READY: ANTICIPATION

It is unknown when an emergency will take place or what form it will be. But it is safe to anticipate that a crisis will occur. To quote a well known politician: 'Work for the best. Plan for the worst.' Staff should be aware of responsibilities before, during and after a crisis. They also should understand to whom they are answerable. They should be fully aware of the emergency plan roll out. They should understand the team's relationships with outside bodies.

## 6.3 GETTING READY: PREPARATION

Review the emergency communications plan and confirm all staff understand its strategy. Create an emergency role play training session to reflect an emerging crisis and how it will be handled according to the plan. Evaluate strengths and weaknesses and then revise. If necessary, deliver an additional training programme if gaps in knowledge occur or the plan is altered. Check the media profile list to ensure it is up to date. Create generic templates for news releases. Create templates for tracking media requests once the emergency plan has been put into operation. Identify a controllable location for news conferences and broadcast interviews and ensure parking is available for media transport and satellite vehicles. Allow media checks for signal strength for satellite cover and access for cabling. Understand channels for gathering crucial information about a crisis and how information will be collected. Understand the favoured methods of reporting by different media.

## 6.4 FORMING LINKS

The more that outside bodies and the media understand the emergency strategy, the more easily it will function. Create seminars for groups that will be part of the emergency cover and show how the organisation will work to overcome a crisis. Get feedback from attending groups, evaluate their comments and revise the plan if necessary. Partners, including the media, have a vital role to play and their knowledge of their own sectors is valuable. They will also feel part of the process of informing the public so when a crisis occurs, they will participate more actively.

## 6.5 CREATING MATERIAL

A communications team should develop background material ready for use. For instance, it could be a simple glossary of technical terminology or it can take the form of what a specialist does in an animal disease outbreak. Health education packs can be prepared. Graphics can also be developed and ready on DVD or on hard copy to show how a specific region or nation compares with other areas of the world. A team can offer pre-emergency stories to keep the public informed. For instance, press trips can be organised to show journalists how communities are faring following a previous emergency. This type of work creates better relationships with the media and helps a communication team understand what different types of media (broadcast, print and web) need.

# CHAPTER 7: THE EMERGENCY PLAN

## 7.1 AIM

The aim of an emergency plan is to maintain trust, inform the public of key messages, create health awareness campaigns and liaise with relevant partners. It should be organised according to local requirements. What is essential in one region may be irrelevant in another.

## 7.2 VITAL POINTS

There are important features that are common to all cultures. An emergency plan must be able to

- describe what defines an emergency
- explain what procedures are in place to begin use of the plan
- describe a process to highlight key messages and supporting information for statements
- ensure consistency of messages
- begin internal communications so managers can approve what goes into the public domain
- begin internal process so relevant colleagues know what is to be put into public domain
- agree on how information is put into the public arena and who releases it
- have a lead spokesperson or substitute to deliver key messages
- create a list of experts in relevant fields for interviews
- finalize and arrange a controlled location for news conferences and interviews
- open access for the media
- release background information that has been already prepared
- begin prepared public awareness campaigns
- open two-way communications with public: hotlines, email
- have a roster in place for 24/7 cover
- have a team member to evaluate the effectiveness of the emergency plan and monitor media coverage and media errors
- correct media errors and internal errors quickly
- manage individual media enquiries with a template form
- describe criteria for ending the use of the emergency plan
- begin informal sessions with partners and media about their perception of handling of the crisis
- evaluate feedback and revise plan if necessary.

# CHAPTER 8: DEALING WITH THE EMERGENCY

## 8.1 24/7 COVER

Once an emergency is identified and the emergency plan is active, 24/7 cover goes into operation. This ensures media and public queries are handled and that fast changing events are communicated to the public. The lead spokesperson should be fully aware of key messages and his/her on duty hours known by all. When he/she is off duty, the on duty team should be left with a clear understanding of key messages, a schedule of the next day's events and a list of unresolved problems and queries. When the next day's team comes on duty, there should be a hand-over so overnight problems and calls are known.

## 8.2 INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

It is essential to begin the emergency internal communications strategy. This allows senior managers to know what is happening, what information is being released and the day's events such as press conferences or broadcast interviews. There should be a clear line of communication between all levels of management.

## 8.3 BRIEFINGS

Key messages should be available as soon as possible. It is vital to be first in the media with information. It lessens the problem of errors circulating in the public domain. There should be clear information given out about briefings or press conferences. This allows the media to prepare coverage. There should also be simple instructions about press phonelines, public hotlines and access to the web for factual information. Background materials should be made available by email and hard copy. There should be no off the record briefings. For internal briefings, there should be a system for allowing the organisation and partners to meet to ensure a clear flow of information.

## 8.4 CORRECTING ERRORS

Errors occur in the public domain or emanate from inside the structure of the organisation. They must be dealt with immediately. See Chapter 11.

## 8.5 MONITORING CRISIS COVER

There should be a monitoring strategy in place to ensure the emergency plan is used correctly. The aim of the plan is to maintain trust, inform the public of key messages, create health awareness campaigns and liaise with relevant partners. Ensure these priorities have been met by carrying out the functions in the plan. There should also be monitoring of the media requests and coverage.

# CHAPTER 9: DEALING WITH THE AFTERMATH

## 9.1 LAUNCHING THE AFTERMATH PLAN

Once an emergency has been identified as over, the aftermath programme begins. The communications team can stand down from 24/7 cover. But there should still be seven days per week cover. The lead spokesperson should still be on duty to articulate key post emergency messages. All media should be given access to affected locations to report on conditions and the return to normalcy. The communications team may identify individuals in the affected areas who can represent how communities have recovered from a threat. A health education programme can be launched and distributed. Two-way communication channels, such as hotlines, should be kept opened and monitored. This allows the public to ask important questions and it gives an indication of problems experienced by the public.

## 9.2 MONITORING THE AFTERMATH PLAN

As with the emergency plan, there should be a constant monitoring and review of the aftermath plan to ensure key messages are aired and that the public is given the opportunity to access the messages. An outline of the process can be:

- Monitor
- Feedback- internal and external
- Evaluate
- Review
- Change
- Approval

## 9.3 EVALUATING AND REVIEWING THE EMERGENCY COVER

Once there is time to, an evaluation and review of the emergency plan can begin. It can be split into three areas:

- Review of internal process
- Review of relations with partners and the public
- Review of the media: key messages offered and key messages delivered

Change can be initiated based on evaluation and review

# CHAPTER 10: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

## 10.1 IDENTIFYING A PROBLEM

For every problem, there is usually a solution. Some problems are unique and cannot be understood until it happens. Other problems are universal and can be anticipated.

## 10.2 DEALING WITH A PROBLEM AND REVIEW

It is essential to identify a stumbling block and let colleagues and line management know it is happening or about to happen. Once the problem has been handled and solution attempted, it is important to review how it was approached, whether it was successful and whether change is needed in dealing with a similar pitfall.

## 10.3 SOME COMMON PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

### Problem:

Interviews go off message, become aggressive or are based on bad information.

### Solution:

Control the interview by asking vital questions beforehand. Correct misassumptions and knowledge gaps. Bridge to return to key message territory.

### Problem:

Key message contains too much jargon or too many statistics.

### Solution:

Simplify messages so a child can understand them. One device is to imagine your child, your niece or your neighbour's child. Would that young individual understand a key message? If not, simplify it and tell the media there is additional material available by email or on hard copy.

### Problem:

A comment is recorded without your knowledge and then transmitted.

### Solution:

Assume that all microphones are live. This is especially true of news conferences. Assume that as soon as you enter a studio- whether for television or radio- you are being recorded. A comment can be taped unintentionally and then broadcast so it is untrue that all unintended comments are knowingly recorded for use.

### Problem:

A journalist asks for an off-the-record comment or briefing.

### Solution:

It is best to have offer no off-the-record access. In an emergency, all information should be delivered to all media.

**Problem:**

A crisis develops and the media is about to print or broadcast before an official statement.

**Solution:**

It is of prime importance that a message is delivered first and fast. Only deal with known facts and say if certain facts are unknown. By giving out information and key messages as early as possible, a void will not be created which can be filled with rumour or badly informed editorial content.

**Problem:**

There is a continual demand for information - especially from the international media.

**Solution:**

It cannot be ignored. Be available: prepare in advance for a crisis and the consequent media rush for information. Have a 24/7 staffing plan and expect different approaches from foreign media who may want more direct and immediate forms of coverage such as live interviews at anytime. Deliver media training for different forms of interviews.

# CHAPTER 11: HOW TO REDRESS AN ERROR

## 11.1 IDENTIFYING AN ERROR

Once a suspected error is identified, confirm with a colleague that a mistake has been made. Accept that accidental errors occur. Do not hold a specific media outlet to task as long as the media is responsible enough to correct an important message.

## 11.2 CORRECTING AN ERROR

Factual mistakes must be corrected immediately. It is difficult to counter an error once it is in the public domain for long. Find the correct facts and use high-speed forms of communications to channel the correct information. These can be email, news conference or website. A specific medium, such as a radio station or newspaper, should be asked to correct its mistake. Log all errors during a crisis to allow review. Change a process if it is creating errors. Be aware and sensitive to the difference between a factual news item and an opinion piece. Have in place an agreed strategy beforehand with media for dealing with correction of journalistic errors.

## 11.3 DEALING WITH AN INTERNAL ERROR

A mistake by the organisation may occur especially in times of stress. A lead spokesperson must be able to publicly explain that errors have occurred and then define the true state of affairs. Once an error is identified and corrected, the individual must be made aware of the mistake and trained not to repeat the process that created the error. It is not advisable to publicly blame an individual but it is important to tell an audience that once all the facts are known, there will be a public review of what went wrong. Have in place an agreed strategy beforehand with media for dealing with correction of internal errors.

# CHAPTER 12: CLOSURE

## 12.1 IDENTIFYING AND DEALING WITH CLOSURE

There should be a process in place within the organisation to define when both an emergency plan and an aftermath plan can be stopped. The communications team can then begin a process of looking at the handling of each step of the crisis

- Getting ready
- The crisis itself
- The aftermath

Each step of the emergency should be assessed by the following means:

- Monitoring
- Feedback- internal and external
- Evaluation
- Review
- Change if necessary
- Approval of change
- Distribution of altered plans
- Training if necessary

## 12.2 DELIVERING CLOSURE TO THE MEDIA

Good relations with all media are vital. A message of thanks to editors or programme heads will help improve trust and define common goals. If there have been problems with a specific organisation because of an error or a disagreement, it is advisable to take the time to sort out the source of the problem and come to a common understanding. The communications team can arrange an informal gathering for the media or individual reporters who covered the event to acknowledge their efforts.

## 12.3 DELIVERING CLOSURE TO INTERNAL STAFF

Once there has been an assessment of the team's work, an informal meeting can be held. A departmental head may wish to point out individual efforts by staff during the stress of a crisis. There should be the chance for staff to privately air their feelings over the crisis coverage, whether they felt they carried out their responsibilities correctly and how management handled its duties. A written document of the handling of the crisis should be distributed detailing the strengths and weaknesses of the coverage. Subjects could include:

- Anticipating and preparedness
- Comprehension of the emergency plan
- 24/7 roster cover
- Delivery of key messages
- Delivery of crisis cover
- Delivery of aftermath cover
- Delivery of closure
- Relations with all media
- Errors identified and corrected