Action Sheet Nr. 10: Key MHPSS[1] Aspects in Crisis Communication

Area
All event types, all target groups, all phases

Key principle: Establish an open, fair dialogue with all relevant stakeholders (Olsson, 2011, p. 143)

Key actions

- **Integrate the communication strategy into the decision-making process and link the communication strategy to the ongoing process of crisis development**

When crisis communication follows a process model, it is more comprehensive and systematic in addressing the entire range of strategies from pre- to post-event.

- **Plan before crisis events occur and update plans regularly**

Planning includes identifying risk areas and corresponding risk reduction; pre-setting initial crisis responses so that decision-making during a crisis is more efficient; and identifying necessary response resources. Significant case-based evidence exists, for example, that it is essential to conduct risk analysis and assessment for the management of risk and the prevention of crisis. All organisations should identify the potential hazards they face.

- **Accept the public as a partner**

Accepting the public as a legitimate and equal partner emerged from the literature as a best practice in crisis communication.

- **Listen to the public´s concerns and understand the audience and respond in an adequate manner**

In order to achieve effective dialogue, an organisation managing risks or experiencing a crisis must listen to the concerns of the public, take these concerns into account, and respond accordingly.

- **Communicate honestly**

Effective crisis communicators are honest in their public communication.,In the long run, honesty fosters credibility with both the media and the public. Moreover, a response that is less than honest may, ultimately, create the perception of wrongdoing**.**

- **Communicate with candor and openness**

Communication should be candid,and open. Be aware that there are cases where there could be good reason for not releasing all information. There is a big difference between responding to a difficult or sensitive question with an absolute lie (or even a white lie, e.g. ”I don’t know”, ”I don’t have that information”) and with either an honest acknowledgement of uncertainty, or, for example, ”I’m not prepared to answer that question.” The latter, which is honest, but not fully open, will be sometimes appropriate and sometimes not. The guiding principle could be you do not always have to say everything, but what you say must be honest and true (i.e. based on the facts that are known at the given moment).

- **Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources**

Collaborative relationships allow agencies to coordinate their messages and activities. Developing a pre-crisis network is a very effective way of coordinating and collaborating with other credible sources. To maintain effective networks, crisis planners and communicators should continuously seek to validate sources, choose subject-area experts, and develop relationships with stakeholders at all levels. Coordinating messages enhances the probability of consistent messages and may reduce the confusion the public experiences. Consistency of message is one important benchmark of effective crisis communication

[1] Mental health and psychosocial support

- **Meet the needs of the media and remain accessible**

Since some sections of the media thrive on crisis and scandal – and others have an important democratic role in uncovering incompetence and corruption – it is necessary for senior crisis managers (above all, politicians or their representatives) to collaborate with the media at the preparedness phase to ensure that they are both able to go about their business if a crisis hits. Rather than viewing the media as a liability in a crisis situation, risk and crisis communicators should engage the media through open and honest communication, and use the media as a strategic resource to aid in managing the crisis. When communicating with the media, organisations should avoid inconsistency by accepting uncertainty and avoid any temptation to offer overly reassuring messages. Media training should be completed by crisis communicators prior to the onset of a crisis situation. Crisis spokespersons should be identified and trained as part of pre-crisis planning. Politicians and senior responders need to know that the media are reporting responsibly (rather than just trying to ”get a story” and the media need to know that politicians are being appropriately honest, open, and cooperative (rather than trying to ”spin a story”). But this is difficult, given that outside of disaster contexts, openness is not necessarily the norm.

- **Communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy**

Whether communicating with the public, media, or other organisations, designated spokespersons should demonstrate appropriate levels of compassion, concern, and empathy. These characteristics significantly enhance the credibility of the message and enhance the perceived legitimacy of the messenger both before and after an event.

- **Accept uncertainty and ambiguity**

A best practice of crisis communication is to acknowledge the uncertainty inherent in the situation with statements such as, ‘‘The situation is fluid,’’ and, ‘‘We do not yet have all the facts.’’ This form of strategic ambiguity allows the communicator to refine the message or avoid statements that are likely to be shown as inaccurate, as more information becomes available. Acknowledging uncertainty should not be used as a strategy, however, to avoid disclosing uncomfortable information or closing off further communication. In these cases, context information about the search and rescue and other actions may be of more use. Thia may include explaining that information is being gathered and has to be validated continuously in the course of the developing situation and actions have to be adapted to the changing needs of the situation.

- **Messages of self-efficacy**

The public health literature and risk communication research emphasise the importance of messages that provide specific information telling people what they can do to reduce harm. These messages of self-efficacy can help restore some sense of control over an uncertain and threatening situation. These messages may, ultimately, help reduce the harm created by a risk factor.

BASED ON:

Seeger, M.W. (2006). Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process, Journal of Applied Communication Research, 34:3, **p. 237ff**. Available at http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rjac20/34/3#.Uxb4gF7gJCM

Additional resources

Baron, G., & Philbin, J. (2009). Social media in crisis communication: Start with a drill. PR Tactics.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2012). Crisis emergency and risk communication. Be first – be right – be credible. http://www.bt.cdc.gov/cerc/pdf/cerc_2012edition.pdf

Coombs, W.T. & Holladay, S.J. (2009). The Handbook of Crisis Communication. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing.

Covello, V. T. (2003). Best Practices in Public Health Risk and Crisis Communication. Journal of Health Communication, 8, 5.

Eyre, A. & Dix, P. (2014). Collecitve Conviction: The Story of Disaster Action Paperback. Liverpool University Press.

Olsson, E.K. (2011). Communication in Crises of Public Diplomacy. In L. Svedin (Eds.) Ethics and Crisis Management (p. 141-161). Charlotte: Information Age.

Seeger, M. W. (2006). Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 34(3), 232-244.

Semple, E. (2009). Update your crisis comms plan with social media. Strategic Communication Management, 13(5), 7.

Tinker, T. L., Dumlao, M., & McLaughlin, G. (2009). Effective Social Media Strategies During Times of Crisis: Learning from the CDC, HHS, FEMA, the American Red Cross and NPR. Public Relations Strategist.

Ulmer, R., Sellnow, T., & Seeger, M. (2007). Effective Crisis Communication Moving From Crisis to Opportunity. SAGE Publications.

Tools

IMPACT, Jong, W. & Hoijtink, L. (2011). In Contact with Survivors - Points for Consideration for Communication Between Government and Survivors After Disasters And Crises. Points for Consideration (Each Chapter). Points for consideration: Direct communication, p.18. Available at www.impact-kenniscentrum.nl/doc/publicaties_producten/in%20contact%20with%20survivors.pdf

Infoasaid (n.d.). Communication Strategy Template. Available at https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/communication_strategy_template.pdf

Infoasaid (n.d.). Questions to assess whether TV should be used to communicate with crisis affected communities in a humanitarian emergency. Available at https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/questions_on_information_needs_and_access_for_inter_agency_needs_assessments.pdf

Infoasaid (n.d.). The Characteristics of Different Communication Channels. Available at https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/characteristics_of_different_communication_channels_0.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2012). Crisis and emergency Risk Communication (CERC): 2012 Edition. Chapter 4: Crisis Communication Plans, p.85. Available at http://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/pdf/CERC_2012edition.pdf

Practice examples

Council of Europe / EFPA (2010). Lessons learned in psychosocial care after disasters. Available at http://www.recoveryplatform.org/assets/publication/Lessonslearned_psycosocial%20care%20EC_EN.pdf

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (2001). Psychosocial Support: Best Practices from Red Cross Red Crescent Programs. Available at http://helid.digicollection.org/en/d/Js2902e/

OPSIC-Team (2014). Practice examples. Flooding 2013 in Austria. Comprehensive Guideline OPSIC-Project - Annex.

OPSIC-Team (2014). Practice examples. School Shooting 2008 in Finland. Comprehensive Guideline OPSIC-Project - Annex.