



# THE SIX STAGES OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLANNING

## PHASE ONE: THE WARNING PHASE

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# The Six Stages of Crisis for Communication Planning – Phase One: The Warning Phase

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*This brief is based on the writings of Robert C. Chandler, Ph.D.*

[Learn more about Dr. Chandler here.](#)

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A crisis or disaster is an unexpected event that disrupts normal operational processes and has the potential to create significant financial, security, safety and reputational harm. Depending on the nature and severity of a crisis, the safety and well-being of people may be endangered and may present complex threats and risks. Typically, such an event is viewed as a “singularity” – it happens. Following from that premise planning, especially for crisis or disaster communication, is too often viewed as a “singular” communication plan or a static set of communication functions. My research and analysis suggests that in reality, crises and disasters have a recognizable life cycle or somewhat predictable series of “stages” through which such events progress. Each of these stages presents distinctive challenges, obstacles, needs and opportunities.

These unique aspects require recognition and adaptation if the situation is to be effectively managed. This is particularly true for overall successful communication where the advantages of strategic adaptation to the circumstances of each major stage as well as the purposes, goals, challenges and functions of communication during each stage. Communication planning can be enhanced by recognizing and segmenting planning for these particular phases. Every stage of the crisis dictates the audience's requirements, including the need for information and dictates the response of the agency providing the warning.

There are six identified phases within every crisis:

- (1) Warning;
- (2) Risk Assessment;
- (3) Response;
- (4) Management;



- (5) Resolution; and
- (6) Recovery.

This is the first of six essays that will explore each phase of a crisis, identify specific areas of concern and provide manageable solutions.

The first stage of a crisis is the *warning phase*. Communication best practices dictate that crisis communication during the first phase of a crisis or emergency be constructed and consistent with the commitment to take appropriate action to increase readiness as a potential emergency situation looms. Communication undertaken during the warning phase of an emergency situation is designed to increase ability to respond effectively to an emergency when it occurs. Responsiveness should include procedures to implement notification of personnel assigned to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), the response team and emergency management support functions. The warning phase notices may be the last instructions, reminders, and notices that are communicated before the chaos and confusion of a disaster or emergency springs forth. Being mindful of the wording in notification messages will either motivate your audience to act professionally and appropriately or might unintentionally frighten them and create undue stress.



The first three stages of a crisis may not always occur in sequence. In some cases there is no advance warning. In many instances the need to react/respond must proceed simultaneously with the process of assessing risk and determine the response. In fact, the responding and managing stages may themselves be implemented while risk assessment or eventually resolution and recovery stages come on-line. The value of viewing these as stages is not that this is an inherent and necessary absolute sequence (although it does generally follow the life cycle of an emerging crisis or disaster) but rather that these “stages” require preparation for the unique goals, needs, objectives, target audiences, messages and challenges which each presents. In most of these stages it is likely that the communication processes would need to run concurrently and at the same times as other processes.

It is also important to remember that communication planning needs to provide for two-way communication during the warning stage. It is essential to have plans and procedures for retrieving, collecting, processing, sorting, analyzing, evaluating and ultimately discarding information from a variety of credible sources. Having a systematic way to gather situational intelligence and reports from critical credible sources as well as having an established process to effectively manage that inbound information such that you can assess the threat risk during a warning stage is an important predictor of overall crisis management success.

One key aspect for communication plans is to ensure that you are constantly vigilant and on the lookout for potential warning signs. This includes active scanning of traditional and new media, especially social media. Seeking information and assessments that will aid in the threat, risk and impact analysis. These

efforts should also include monitoring of communication within the boundaries of your organization (e.g. formal and informal messages) as well as processing feedback (both positive and negative) from customers, vendors, stakeholders, neighbors, media etc.

Your *warning signs radar or sonar* should help you anticipate, predict, avoid and better mitigate many types of crises and disasters (although admittedly not all and not always). This means that you should have inbound communication plans and processes to help you see “over the event horizon.” I frequently use the example of an iceberg when discussing warning signs. The largest part of any iceberg (and the most dangerous part for a passing ship) is the part of the iceberg which is below the water line and not immediately or easily visible. To see the real threat and risk of the iceberg, you have to consider the parts that are not visible with “normal” vision. You need a proactive “sonar” to see what dangers may be lurking below the water line.

Crises may occur under conditions in which there is a very distinct warning phase or where there is no warning period whatsoever. One example of dissimilar warning periods is the difference between bomb threats (which provides a distinct warning phase) whereas an explosion as a result of a bomb provides little to no warning period. Certain types of emergency incidents have very distinct warning phases the warning phase might be accurately represented by a “watch” issued by the National Weather Service



for a storm or other weather event. The conditions are right for an event, and it is the time to prepare for the onset of a crisis. (e.g., hurricanes and winter storms), whereas other incidents have no warning periods or very subtle warning signs that often go unnoticed (e.g., power outages, workplace violence and earthquakes). Regardless of the length of the warning phase, effective communication and incident notification is essential to protect the health and safety of people during major crises the warning phase also requires a response that includes notifying key

personnel, law enforcement and risk management constituents.

Outbound communication during the warning stage is often precautionary and is intended to heighten awareness. Messages during the warning phase need to be kept simple and direct. The alert messages need to be consistent and draw on prior training and expectations. Having a sufficient notification system in place directly impacts the appropriateness and overall success of the response. Typically, emergency notification preparedness focuses on the processes or procedures established to send and receive messages. There may be limited notification and alerts sent to those who are potentially at risk or can be of assistance in assessing the danger or mitigating the threats. The majority of communication will focus on interaction among your team and “key constituents” such as citizens, students, employees and other non-crisis team members to whom you are accountable to communicate.

Instructions and notices that either prevent the occurrence of an emergency or mitigate the risk in ways that minimize the adverse impact of an emergency are examples of warning phase communication. This is also the time to start alerting or activating specific actions during emergency situations. Notification could also include informing personnel of the circumstances under which emergency procedures would be activated or become effective and/or under what conditions they would be terminated. Warning phase notifications should include making status reports, taking stock of preparedness and alerting

personnel of their subsequent notification, recall rosters and procedures if an incident occurs. The goal is to provide these personnel with the information needed to implement emergency response should such action become necessary. This should include procedures to implement notification of personnel assigned to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), the response team and



emergency management support functions. The warning phase notices may be the last instructions, reminders and notices that you communicate before the chaos and confusion of a disaster or emergency springs forth. Communication during the warning phase includes communication to the EOC, security dispatch and facilities work-order control center.

Warning stage communication should support preparing organizational resources, response field personnel and readiness to sustain contact during emergencies. Communication in the warning phase may also include providing instructions and reminders for the reporting of damage assessment information to the EOC is also helpful to disseminate during a warning phase. In addition, it is not premature to alert all elements associated with your response and recovery to verify their readiness to respond.

Mitigation alert efforts are your last opportunity to make all things ready to prevent, limit the impact of and quickly respond to an emergency. Warnings should be consistent with your preparedness instruction efforts. If you have time and opportunity during a warning phase, you should distribute brief and urgent preparedness alerts. These may include informing people about how to take the necessary precautions to protect themselves and their property if the emergency were to occur.

Many types of emergencies can strike quickly and without warning, requiring instant response. There are a number of last minute instructions that could be issued during a warning phase, including actions to take to avoid harm or to prevent an incident from occurring, along with how to be prepared to bounce back after an emergency.

A warning will also affect both you and your audience. Whether it is an approaching storm or a bomb threat, the warning phase will see a rise in concern and anxiety, physiological changes, cognitive effects and situational and contextual alterations. Stress and distracters during an emergency can impact the ability to focus, be attentive, listen, think, comprehend and comply with instructions. Messages during the warning phase need to be kept simple and direct. In addition, the alert messages need to be consistent and draw on prior training and expectations.

Alert messages during the warning phase should focus on non-dramatized, objective descriptions of the threat risks, provide specific behavioral requests and incorporate a method to confirm compliance and status. Therefore, interactive communication plays key roles during warning periods. Warnings should also trigger assessment and risk analysis communication. Stick with the facts and be diligent and vigilant in evaluating information before you release it in your alerts. Outbound communication during this stage is often precautionary but should accomplish key tasks to alert and advise recipients. Whether

intended or unintended, the wording in your notification messages will either motivate your audience to act professionally and appropriately or might frighten them and create undue stress. In addition, disclosures and transparency will build credibility and trust with audiences. Awareness and vigilance can be raised with alerts during the warning phase. This may help further educate and inform the audience about the potential threats

To help facilitate crisis and emergency communication planning for the warning stage, it is typical to run interactive sessions with the key communication planning team members where we review the needs, challenges, audiences, sources of information, optimal channels and develop a road map to help ensure highly effective communication during the warning stage of the next crisis.



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