The Whys and Hows of Implementing a Crisis Communication Plan

Thanks to smartphones, the Internet, and social media, the news cycle is now 24-7-365. Being prepared to communicate and respond during a crisis is more critical than ever. While most schools have adopted a Crisis Management Plan,* far fewer have taken their preparedness to the next level—creating a Crisis Communication Plan. Although having both plans may seem redundant or unnecessary, there is an important difference between the two.

A *Crisis Management Plan* (also known as an Emergency Response Plan) is an important part of your school's overall crisis plan, and addresses the procedures your school follows amid a crisis. For example, where do students shelter when a tornado approaches? What triggers a lockdown situation on your campus? How will students and faculty evacuate during a fire?

On the other hand, a *Crisis Communication Plan* defines the people, systems, and tools you use to communicate internally and externally during and after a crisis or emergency at your school.

Although unpleasant to consider, we know that it's not a matter of *if* a crisis will strike our school, it's a matter of *when*. The word "crisis" typically refers to a sudden, intense, and unstable situation that certainly leads to a negative outcome. Those who work in schools, however, know that many crises first percolate behind the scenes before becoming public knowledge.

Examples of situations in your school that may require deploying your Crisis Communication Plan include:

- the sudden termination or arrest of an employee;
- parent unrest regarding school policies;
- the death of an employee or student;
- an accident involving a school-owned or chartered vehicle;
- a fire or other natural disaster that affects your campus; or
- a crime committed on your campus.

The above are just a few examples of common crises in schools. Regardless of the time frame in which a crisis occurs, a Crisis Communication Plan is your best ally in preparedness.

The implementation of your school's Crisis Communication Plan should be led by the Marketing Communications Director. Those who may contribute to its development include your Technology Director, Business Manager, Security Director, and Facilities Director.

As your school leadership develops a Crisis Communication Plan, there are five key components to consider.

Team

Determine who will be part of your communication team should a crisis occur. The team's composition may vary depending on the crisis or situation. However, there are key stakeholders who are almost always a part of the team—the School Head, Board President, Security Director, Marketing Communications Director, and the school's legal counsel. Other potential team members may include the Guidance Counselor(s), Technology Director, Facilities Director, Division Heads(s), and outside public relations counsel. Fully inform standing members of their roles, and what the School Head's expectations are in the event of a crisis.

Spokesperson

In most crisis situations, the School Head should be the primary spokesperson and communicator. During times of instability and uncertainty, it is vital to keep your school's leader as visible as possible. If the School Head is in crisis (e.g., a pending lawsuit, dismissal, or urgent health condition), then the Board President should serve as the spokesperson.

Having a single spokesperson is, as noted, critical for appropriate and consistent messaging. It is also important to establish a relationship with the media before an untoward event. That way, they *may* look on your story in a more favorable (less critical) light.

If your Marketing Communications Director is experienced and trained in working with crisis situations, he or she may also serve in this capacity by being the first point of contact for media inquiries.

Systems

To communicate effectively and quickly with key constituents during a crisis, schools should have systems in place, including:

- a phone system that allows for recorded voice messages to be disseminated to emergency contacts;
- a text alert system that does the same;
- an email delivery vehicle that includes the ability to segment mailing lists easily and by constituent;
- social media platforms; and
- a website "dark site" ready for deployment at a moment's notice.

Perhaps least familiar to school administrators is the concept of a "dark site." Dark sites can be particularly useful in a slow-building crisis, e.g., a spreading influenza pandemic or an approaching snowstorm or hurricane. A dark site is a premade, unpublished web page that can be activated if an emergency occurs. The page can be prepopulated with generic information, with specific, crisis-related details added just before release.

Toolkit

Your crisis communication toolkit should exist in both digital and hard copy form. If a situation causes loss of connectivity, you must be able to access your plan. Keep a hard copy of your toolkit in two places:

- a secure on-campus location, such as the School Head's office; and
- a nearby off-campus location, such as an administrator's home.

Your toolkit should include the following items:

– a copy of both your Crisis Management and Crisis Communication Plans;

– a list of key contact phone numbers, including Administrative Team members, Board members, local media, and emergency services (with backup numbers in case primary contacts are unavailable);

– a printed copy of your family directory;

– a list of passwords to school databases and communication vehicles, such as for the website, social media, and texting platforms; and

– a waiting statement.

A waiting statement is a prepared, simple quote used to communicate after an emergency has occurred but before all the facts have been collected. It might look something like this.

We are aware of the situation. We are still gathering information, are in communication with appropriate authorities, and we will provide an update as soon as we have more to share.

Practice and Reflect

Crisis communications team members should gather at least once a year to review your existing plan, reflect on the previous year, and contemplate possible scenarios that may impact your school.

Consider hiring a crisis communications expert who can lead your team through a series of exercises, including:

– reviewing best practices for crisis communications and media relations;

– completing a series of case studies;

– providing on-camera interview training; and

– revisiting previous scenarios that impacted your school, and preparing for any concerns that may be on the horizon.

While no school administrator looks forward to facing a crisis, they will sleep easier at night knowing they have a plan and a system in place when an emergency strikes. By implementing a Crisis Communication Plan—and by regularly revisiting and practicing its protocols—you position your school to manage the speed of information (and misinformation) in a digital age.

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* See "Does Your Crisis Plan Really Protect Your Students (and School)?" *Ideas & Perspectives*, 35-12-47.