



COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS

A MANUAL FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

WORKING DRAFT

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Crisis: A significant disruption which stimulates extensive news media coverage and public scrutiny that impacts normal business activities.

Purpose:

The Crisis Communications Response Plan outlines the policies and procedures for coordinating communication within the campus community, between the University and the media, and with the public in the event of a public safety emergency or issue crisis. Public safety crises may include fires, bomb threats, natural disasters, major crimes or accidents. Issue crises include high profile investigations, protests, riots or other situations that demand a public response. The Crisis Communications Response Plan does not supersede public safety emergency procedures. All such campus emergencies should be reported immediately to Campus Police by dialing 9-1-1 from any campus phone. Cell phone users may also dial 9-1-1 and ask the operator to be connected to CSU Police

In any crisis, there are the two crisis teams – one that deals with operational issues and the other that deals with communications issues. This manual addresses communications and media relations in a crisis and includes procedures to quickly identify potentially harmful situations and a process for handling communications effectively. It is meant to complement the University's Campus Emergency Response Plan.

Objectives:

The overall goal is to ensure that Cleveland State University provides a credible public response within **one hour** after becoming aware of any incident involving health, safety or the environment, or any media inquiry or potential issue crisis that may lead to a story that damages the University's reputation.

Other communications objectives in a crisis include:

- ✓ Assess situation factually and determine if a communications response is needed.
- ✓ Assemble Crisis Communications Response Team to develop and assist with implementing the appropriate responses.
- ✓ Stabilize the damage to the University's reputation.
- ✓ Communicate factual information with internal and external audiences.

Six important rules throughout any crisis:

1. *Get the facts.*
2. *Stick to the facts*
 - ✓ *Say nothing until you are sure.*
 - ✓ *Keep everyone current.*
 - ✓ *Never speculate about what may happen next.*
3. *The President or his designee is the lead spokesperson.*
4. *Tell the story; don't let the story be told. Get out in front of bad news.*
5. *Be consistent.*
6. *Evaluate after the crisis.*

Types of crises

There are three types of crises – public safety emergencies, issue crises and potential issue crises.

Public safety emergencies

University Police dispatchers (x 2111) should always be the first point of contact in any situation threatening the health or safety of individuals, research projects, the

University environment or the University in general.

Issue crisis

An issue crisis is any situation that may cause significant damage to Cleveland State University's image. Examples include investigative reports alleging mismanagement or misconduct or Administration or faculty errors or "poor judgment calls." Issues crises escalate rapidly with little or no preparation time and as such require an immediate response by the University.

Potential issue crisis

A potential issue crisis is still developing. Therefore, it is critical to develop a crisis communications plan before the crisis occurs. This allows the University to respond and manage the situation before it becomes public. Furthermore, it allows the University to be in control and tell the story instead of letting the story be told.

Crisis Communications Response Procedures

Step One: Assess the crisis and gather the facts.

Initially, the person who identified the crisis should gather accurate information from appropriate sources and consult with the President, Vice President for Administration, the Assistant VP for Marketing, and/or the Director of Marketing and Public Affairs.

The President or Vice President for Administration will decide if a Crisis Communications Response Team should be formed and will inform the President.

Step Two: Assemble a Crisis Communications Response Team.

At a minimum, the Crisis Communications Response Team will include:

- ✓ Vice President, Administration
- ✓ Assistant VP, Marketing
- ✓ Director of Marketing and Public Affairs
- ✓ University Legal Counsel (or designee)
- ✓ Dean, director, VP in area affected (or designee)

In a public safety emergency, the team will expand to include:

- ✓ Vice President for Business Affairs & Finance
- ✓ Executive Director of Campus Safety

Depending on the scope of the incident, additional personnel will be added to help gather information and formulate a response. Those may include:

- ✓ President
- ✓ Provost
- ✓ President's Office Staff
- ✓ Vice President for Institutional Diversity
- ✓ Dean of Students
- ✓ Trustees
- ✓ Faculty Senate President
- ✓ Special Assistant to the President for Business and Community Relations
- ✓ University Webmaster
- ✓ Athletic Director
- ✓ Senior Advisor(s) the President

All individuals listed above need a backup contact if they are unreachable. The Vice President for Administration, The Assistant VP for Marketing, and the Director of Marketing and Public Affairs must know who the backup is and how to

reach that person at all times. All team members and backups are responsible for the information outlined in this manual.

Step Three: Develop an action plan for communicating in a crisis.

The Crisis Communications Response Team will assess the situation, consult with others as necessary and develop a plan of action. Furthermore, the team will:

Designate a spokesperson

In most cases, the spokesperson will be the highest ranking individual with the direct knowledge of the event and will be designated by the President or the Vice President for Administration. In situations where calm or leadership is required, the President will be the public spokesperson.

The spokesperson is responsible for communicating the Administration's response to the crisis (developed by the Office of Marketing and Public Affairs in conjunction with the Vice President for Administration and/or the President), demonstrating the University has control of the situation, calming public concern and setting an example for the entire campus.

Caring/empathy must come across in the first 30-45 seconds.

Non-verbal communication is the most important:

- ✓ Provides up to 75% of the message
- ✓ Overrides verbal content
- ✓ Noticed intensely and quickly
- ✓ Can be interpreted negatively

The Crisis Communications Response Team also will identify other individuals who may serve as spokespersons, or who could comment to the news media. A

member of the Marketing and Public Affairs staff will be assigned to brief the spokesperson on the facts of the situation and how to speak effectively to the media.

Draft a fact sheet

The fact sheet contains a summary statement including all known appropriate details and will be made available to and approved by the Crisis Communications Response Team. The information will be analyzed with respect to the public's right to know and concerns for privacy and security in consultation with the University Legal Counsel.

Communication techniques

- ✓ Be concise
- ✓ Be clear
- ✓ Be brief
- ✓ Limit to three key messages
 - ⇒ Only 7-12 words each
 - ⇒ Include three supporting facts
- ✓ Communicate at a 4th-6th grade level
- ✓ Simple sentence structure

Determine need to establish an executive command center and media-briefing center

Depending on the scope of the crisis, the Crisis Communications Response Team will determine the need for a command center (for police and University officials) and a media-briefing center (for larger media gatherings or press conference).

Identify audience

Crisis Communications Response Team members will be responsible for communicating the facts and the University's response to internal and external audiences. While the designated

spokesperson primarily will be responsible for conveying the Administration's response and communicating with the media, the Crisis Communications Response Team will determine additional audiences as well as the appropriate communications method. Effective communications with key audiences ensures the facts are being told, maintains morale and ensures University operations remain uninterrupted to the degree possible.

Audiences to consider during a crisis include:

Internal

- ✓ Board of Trustees
- ✓ Campus administrators, faculty, staff
- ✓ Students
- ✓ Foundation Board of Directors
- ✓ Alumni Board
- ✓ Alumni Association members (University and Law)
- ✓ Parents of students

External

- ✓ Local law enforcement
- ✓ State and federal law enforcement (if needed)
- ✓ Local community leaders
- ✓ Media
- ✓ Government agencies and elected officials
- ✓ Accreditation or other oversight or grant-making organizations

Establish most effective means of communication

Once the Crisis Communications Response Team determines whom to contact, they must determine the best communication method. The following should be considered when determining communication methods:

⇒ *Media logistics and access*

Determine if the media should be contacted. The Marketing and Public Affairs office will determine the logistics of media contact including: when, where, and how the media will be contacted; which media will be contacted; who will coordinate the press conference (if there is one); who will appear; etc.

The Crisis Communications Response Team will determine what, who and when the media can have access. This includes the appropriateness of live, on-location shooting by TV and newspaper photographers. (When the emergency operations procedures are in effect, the University Chief of Police determines media access to an incident site).

The Crisis Communications Response Team will work with the Marketing and Public Affairs to determine if updates are needed, the frequency and who will speak on behalf of the University.

⇒ *Photography*

The Crisis Communications Response Team will determine if a University photographer is needed to take pictures. Not only is this useful in documenting the event, it may be helpful in responding to the media as well as possible future litigation.

⇒ *Switchboards*

The following high-volume call areas should receive the fact sheet and where to refer calls about the crisis.

| | |
|--------------------|----------|
| Campus switchboard | 687.2000 |
| Campus Police | 687.2020 |
| Human Resources | 687.3636 |

Marketing and Public Affairs 687.2290
President's Office 687.3544
University Administration 687.2155

⇒ *Websites and email*

The University's website will be used if possible to communicate with internal and external audiences and provide updates as necessary. Emergency information will be posted on the www.csuohio.edu homepage.

Depending on the situation, campus-wide email should be used to communicate with internal audiences.

⇒ *Telephone, voicemail and facsimiles*

Messages on a crisis hotline, will be maintained and programmed by University Advancement, can be set up and updated as necessary. Campus-wide voicemail will be coordinated with IST telephone services. Facsimiles can be used to contact certain audiences.

⇒ *Other communication methods*

These include fliers, meetings, campus and U.S. mail, media, etc.

After the crisis

Follow-up with key audiences is essential after any crisis. It will reassure the internal and external audiences as well as bring closure to the event.

Addressing needs of those affected

It is important that the University is empathetic to the needs of faculty, staff and students who may have been directly affected by the crisis. The Crisis Communications Response Team will be responsible for notifying appropriate staff and students of available resources or services to help them through the crisis. Also, representatives from affected units should follow-up with their respective

audiences to ensure their needs are being addressed and offer further assistance as necessary.

Continued concerns

It may be necessary to provide information after the situation has passed. This can be accomplished through email, websites, etc.

Thanking outside partners

If outside agencies were utilized during the crisis, University Advancement will coordinate appropriate follow-up information as well as "thank you" letters to the appropriate individuals.

Debriefing

The Crisis Communications Response Team will meet within **one week** following the crisis to review and evaluate the effectiveness of the operations. Suggested improvements will be incorporated in the Crisis Communications Response Manual.