

Crisis comms top tips

KNOW WHO'S IN THE INNER CIRCLE

Legal, governance,
leadership, comms

DO THE NEXT RIGHT THING

Process, policies and
procedures

DON'T FEED THE FIRE

Defuse with tone and
action

DON'T LEAVE A VACUUM

Map your stakeholders
and plan your messaging

PREACH AND PRACTICE

Do what you say you will
and report back

PAINT A VISION

Past mistakes don't have
to dictate future realities

KNOW WHO'S IN THE INNER CIRCLE

Sometimes you know where there is weakness or risk. But oftentimes true crisis blinds you and comes completely out of the blue.

Therefore the one thing you can do to prepare is think about who you are going to call when the crisis comes. Some of the people needed are obvious; CEO, chair of board etc. Some of them are less obvious. So consider ahead of time who you can call on for help.

The key seats at the table are; Leadership, Legal, Governance (inc HR) and Comms. If you don't have expertise in all these areas something will go wrong.

DO THE NEXT RIGHT THING

Crises need speed not expediency. Often the right thing to do is harder and more costly than the efficient or the pleasing. Panic and fear, or shame and embarrassment can fuel bad decision in a crisis more than anything else. So know your policies. Get legal/governance advice on the procedures you are obligated to follow and put people around you who you trust but can challenge you to do the right thing. Dig into your values and your principles, and if you find it hard to navigate through situations, seek out the people who you trust to speak uncomfortable truths to you. We all need Nathan's in our lives – in crises particularly.

DON'T FEED THE FIRE

Speculation is one of the toughest aspects of a public crisis to deal with. Traditionally you used to just put your head down, stiff upper lip the gossips and ride it out. The social media frenzied court of public opinion makes that much harder these days.

So remember – fires need oxygen. So diffuse the hot air being blown about with clarity and compassion. Don't evade. Don't ignore. Don't dismiss. Be the grownup in the room. Tell people what you're doing, when they will hear more and where they can go to be heard. Make a note of myths and misinformation and use them in your key messages to show you're listening and responding.

DON'T LEAVE A VACUUM

Be clear who your stakeholders are, what their needs, issues and problems are, and how you are going to address them. Each group will have their own distinct challenges and sometimes these will clash. Anticipating and limiting these clashes will go a long way in avoiding future problems.

The biggest challenge you will face is how fast you can respond. People will demand answers far quicker than you have them. This is where holding statements, dedicated mailboxes and transparent timelines will pay dividends in the early stages. Don't seek to overly limit risk in these early stages. Say what you know and nothing more.

There are also differing opinions not just around how quick you respond but also how much you share; do you build the walls, batten down the hatches and close ranks, or do you lay it all bare and live it live on social media? UK culture definitely leans to the latter, as lack of transparency is perceived as protecting the perpetrators, whether that is fair or not. Better to control the narrative than to go silent and have one form in your absence.

PREACH AND PRACTICE

Be careful what you promise because you need to follow through on it. Dates and commitments must be kept in order to win trust and limit fall out. If you say you will release a report, release it. If you say you will let people know next steps on a certain date or in a certain time frame, even if you aren't ready – say something before the deadline, even if it's 'we need more time'. Integrity and trust must be earned and in a crisis you are being scrutinised more closely than ever. So do not over promise if there is a risk you might underdeliver.

PAINT A VISION

Even in the deepest hole you can still encourage people to look up at the stars. We are people of hope. The disillusioning act of a crisis can be painful, even heart-breaking. But you can move the conversation from the acknowledgement of where you currently find yourself to where you believe you are going as you walk in step with God's Spirit.