

June 2007

CAP Public Affairs Crisis Policy

I. Introduction

Crises take many forms anywhere, and often occur unexpectedly. Because crisis situations demand a quick response to sometimes rapidly unfolding events, preparation is key.

Although some situations can be predicted and prevented, others can be minimized if handled in a swift, organized, informed, and caring manner. A prolonged crisis can wreck an organization's reputation if mishandled, eroding public support, morale, membership, and funding. This crisis communication policy complements existing safety and emergency plans. CAP unit PAOs and MIOs will incorporate this policy into their unit crisis response plans, as required, but other unit members should be aware of the policy and their possible roles in a response.

This policy offers possible broad crisis scenarios, suggestions for handling those crises, how to inform external and internal constituencies and general crisis-reaction guidelines. It also outlines what must be done in times of crisis, but should be adapted to the unique scenarios an actual crisis can produce.

II. Crisis preparation

Set up the framework of a crisis communication plan in advance:

Anticipate scenarios

Unit PAOs/MIOs should periodically assess crisis risks. They should anticipate worst-case scenarios of all possible crises, and be prepared for media, public and internal reactions.

Establish a crisis communication team

A communication team, consisting of experienced senior members, should be given clear duties in a crisis, and should meet annually to ensure everyone remains cognizant of their roles.

Keep a current list of phone, cell, and beeper numbers for key officials

Emergency contact numbers for crisis communication team members and other officials should be compiled and continuously updated. If a crisis occurs after hours, crisis communication team members and other important officials will need to be reached wherever they may be.

Have local, state, and/or national emergency contacts available

Permits spokesperson to keep constituent agencies and NHQ informed of the situation.

List possible locations for command/media center

PAOs/MIOs may wish to offer reporters a place where they can attend press briefings, receive updates, or work in the mission base or a removed location. Obtain letters of permission/access from those who oversee those rooms so the crisis team can be assured of quick access. Alternate command/media centers should also be identified.

Craft advance press statements

News release templates should be created and approved in advance, with details to be inserted at the time of the event.

Crisis manning augmentation

Wing PAOs should keep a list of qualified MIOs for mission base assignment and augmentation. NHQ will maintain a national list of volunteer PAOs/MIOs to augment mission base operations during a crisis situation.

Compile a crisis kit

A crisis kit should contain all of the above-mentioned items and lists, along with an updated personnel directory; media lists and phone numbers; updated fact sheets; several legal pads; pens; local, city and state maps; press badges; a list of media addresses; letterhead on CD for press releases; two-way radios; a laptop computer; and a GPS-enabled device for navigation purposes.

Communicate plan in advance

A crisis response plan should be distributed to subordinate unit PAOs/MIOs to facilitate smooth communication. It should also be accessible online. With an easily accessible plan in place, constituencies will know what to expect from the organization when a crisis occurs.

Contact infrastructure resources at least annually

Depending on your location, stay in touch with unit communication experts and facility asset points of contact to ensure officials know of all possible backup methods of communication and the locations of generators in case the power goes out.

III. Identification

Different types of crises call for different responses. To best prepare a response, it is important to identify and evaluate a crisis in its formative stages.

Types of crises:

Sudden — unpredictable crisis, with either Many lives at risk/lost, (examples: hurricane, large fire, flood, riot, terrorist attack, hostage situation) or Individual lives at risk/lost (examples: car accident, aircraft, or other fatal mishap during mission or exercise, murder, small fire, sexual abuse). This type of crisis requires immediate action. If lives are at risk, the first action will be to move swiftly to save lives and prevent injury.

Smoldering — Ongoing crisis expands as information is revealed. This type of crisis can drag out and result in bad press for weeks, months, or even years. These crises should be resolved as quickly as possible. Responding team members need to try to anticipate future developments and mitigate them. (Examples: fraud disclosures, child abuse, sexual harassment lawsuits.)

Bizarre — An unusual, unexpected crisis that does not fit into the above categories.

IV. Crisis Management

When crisis strikes, it is essential to quickly gather and confirm facts, distribute the information and prepare to address the situation. When a crisis is verified, these steps should be taken:

Action

Gather the facts

To respond to a crisis properly, PAOs/MIOs must quickly gather and double-check facts.

Convene the crisis communication team

The core team members should immediately convene and decide the first course of action. Because this must be done swiftly, key members should take the lead, and then bring in the rest of the team as necessary.

Activate relevant safety plans

The crisis communication team members should make sure all applicable safety plans and measures are implemented immediately, particularly if someone's personal safety is at risk.

Develop assistance for those affected

Assistance could include counseling, support groups, memorial services, safety seminars, safety awareness campaigns, hotline numbers or Web sites that provide information to family members, etc.

Designate a command center and/or media center

Such a designation depends on the scale of the crisis.

Prepare a statement and background information

Add specific information to the standby statement, and prepare background information for the media. Stick to the facts.

Meet with governmental/Air Force officials, if necessary

Media orientation flights

As the crisis situation becomes more controlled, PAOs/MIOs need to consider providing media orientation flights.

Communication**Identify audiences**

Determine which stakeholders need to be informed of the situation, and in what order:

- Members and employees
- Organizational governance groups
- Unit public affairs officers
- Media, and by extension, the public
- Parents and next-of-kin

Appoint spokesperson

Name only one spokesperson to ensure the public receives a unified, consistent message. The unit PAO is the likely spokesperson. The organization and crisis communication team must keep the spokesperson informed of the latest developments.

Guide the public

If a crisis involves a possible evacuation, officials should let the public know what areas should be evacuated, timelines for evacuations and where to obtain more information—radio, TV, Web sites etc.

Activate a crisis hotline number (as necessary)

Depending on the magnitude of a crisis, activate and publicize a crisis hotline number. Hotline should include a detailed message or be configured to allow the taking of calls from concerned people.

Develop and communicate facts, message

Officials should develop and repeatedly deliver a few clear messages demonstrating concern about the situation and people involved and explaining how the situation is being handled. An official statement should detail the facts of the situation and the key messages.

Identify best methods of communication

For internal audiences, use broadcast e-mail, the Web site, and/or the crisis hotline. Always make sure internal audiences are the first to be informed. For external audiences, hold press briefings or issue official statements. The first press briefing or statement should come out within five hours of the event or crisis. The time of day, day of the week, whether it's a holiday and infrastructure availability will help determine the preferred methods of communication.

Prepare for tough questions

To prepare the spokesperson for interviews and press briefings, the crisis team should make a list of all possible tough questions the media or the public might ask and compose responses.

Control the message

The organization should stick to the facts and to its key messages. This information should be open and truthful. All bad news should be told up-front and all at once; otherwise, negative media coverage will continue as facts are uncovered.

Manage the flow of information

To facilitate a proactive response, the wing commander and PAO should maintain control of the information by holding a series of press briefings—weekly, daily, or hourly, depending on the situation. This method also provides the media with an update timetable. All Public Affairs officers should be briefed on the situation and told what details they can release. Other members who answer phones should be informed of where/how to direct media calls. Typically, media calls should go to the PAO.

Choose words and phrases carefully

Avoid overly dramatic language that may unnecessarily alarm constituents. Use language that will ease the public's concern yet still convey the truth.

Squelch rumors

During times of crisis, rumors can run rampant. The spokesperson may need to refute them publicly.

Handle sensitive information with care

When discussing people affected by a crisis, make sure your disclosures of personal information follow applicable protocol or regulations. Do not release the name of anyone who is injured or killed until their parents/families have been notified. Consult legal counsel for direction on matters that may involve present or future legal action or investigations.

Cooperate with affected agencies

Stay in contact with applicable governmental or other agencies. Issue joint or complementary press releases with those officials, if necessary.

Keep track of media calls, requests

The PAO should maintain a list of all the reporters associated with the crisis so news clippings of the coverage can be tracked and evaluated.

Respond to the media quickly and fairly

The media provides a way for the organization to publicize its message and also helps shape public opinion. Cooperate with the media, be mindful of their deadlines, and show no favoritism of one media outlet over another.

Respond to the situation ethically

Treating people affected by the crisis in an ethical manner will generate good public relations. Public relations should not be used to spread misinformation. Depending on the response, crisis participants might be cast as victims, villains, or heroes by the media.

V. Evaluate

After the crisis ends, evaluate unit performance and the usability of crisis plans to ensure the unit can more effectively deal with crisis situations in the future.

Evaluate media coverage

Noting how the organization's actions were covered helps PAOs maintain viable media relations strategies.

Debrief

To learn from the experience, the crisis communication team should meet to evaluate every action taken and the crisis communication plan itself

Test the plan

To ensure the plan works and is kept up-to-date, it should be tested and evaluated annually.

Examine applicable policies

Good policy is the best way to avoid certain crises and criticism. No amount of good public relations can make up for bad policy.