

# Crisis Communication 101

A crisis is a reputation-defining moment for your organization. A crisis can be an explosive event such as a shooting or a fire; or, (more likely), it can be a smoldering event like bus drivers walking off the job mid-day, a student protest, or an audit that unexpectedly finds your district in SOD. In either case, missteps are costly; you need a plan. Your plan, developed cooperatively with your superintendent and other key administrators, is an agreement in advance on how communication will work in a crisis.

Your plan should include these elements:

- **A re-affirmation of your communication policy** as open, truthful, responsive, transparent, and committed to stakeholder engagement. Now is not the time to circle the wagons and become defensive.
- **Identify your communication response team.** The team should include the communications person, superintendent, one or two key administrators as the basic group with the notation to include others as appropriate, e.g. principals, program coordinators involved with the specific crisis issue.
- **Identify your key audiences/stakeholders.** This is a key step in managing your message. School districts can't count on media to carry your message let alone accurate facts to parents, employees and others. **As a crisis occurs, the communication response team should create key messages for each audience.** Include in your identification of audiences the most effective way to reach each one in an emergency.
- **Identify the District's spokesperson.** In the case of a significant crisis, the superintendent or the highest ranking district official available should take the lead. In most instances, the primary media contact remains the communications position. In some instances, the position most knowledgeable about the issues surrounding the incident should be prepared for interviews.
- **Manage the "Golden Hour."** The first hour of a crisis contains the "judgment of confidence." The perception of community/media/employees, etc. of your organization's ability to respond to a crisis occurs very early. Include in your plan a "first response checklist" and a template for an initial public statement.
  - **First Response Checklist** – 1. Collect basic facts of situation...who, what, when, where, why, how; 2. Determine communication priorities – which do you get to first? 3. Begin a response strategy - Problem-solving, reducing impact...the proactive response your audiences need to see.
  - **Initial Public Statement** – Keep this template in the plan. It is especially important if a crisis occurs when you are not available. The attached template is courtesy of Gerard Braud, crisis communication consultant. Fax the statement to media outlets not onsite to receive it. Post on your website.

- **Prepare for the news media.** Expect to hear from one to five reporters in the first hour of your crisis. Ensure that all secretaries answering “switchboard” phones know where to transfer media calls. Keep in mind...
  - **The media isn’t fair.** Don’t expect fair.
  - **If reporters sense at first contact you are unprepared, they will report that perception.**
  - **We live in a 24/7 news cycle.** Feed the beast.
  - **In a crisis involving law enforcement, know who releases what information.** Talk to your law enforcement officials before a crisis occurs to understand the appropriate release of information.
  - **Create a list of district-specific information** to distribute as background, e.g. enrollment, number of buildings, size of staff, etc.
  - **Establish media protocols.** When will interviews be available? Where can they film? Be firm, but recognize their role in communicating during a crisis. If you don’t talk to them, they will find someone who will.
- **Ask for help.** If the crisis is large and ongoing, don’t hesitate to ask for help from Minnesota school communicators. Include in your plan the contact information for MinnSPRA and NSPRA.

**Resources:** The Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual for Schools from the National School Public Relations Association: [https://www.nspra.org/sec\\_entry.htm](https://www.nspra.org/sec_entry.htm).

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