WRITING THE CRISIS COMMU- NICATION MANUAL

SWYFT

INTRODUCTION

When unexpected adverse events have a sudden and immediate impact on an organization there is no room for improvisation. A 'gut feeling' approach will not safely navigate you through a crisis and keep your enterprise's reputation intact, nor will experience (be it with the products or services, or the company, or even crisis communications) be enough to guide you through.

Communications professionals who want to perform efficiently in a crisis need to be able to rely on a well rehearsed crisis communications manual. Why? Because no crisis is ever the same. And yet every crisis shares many similar internal and external dynamics and require very similar strategies.

This white paper focuses on the basic principles underpinning the writing of a professional crisis communications manual. In it we address the different actors that often come into play when dealing with a crisis, as well as their respective responsibilities and the kind of content they will be called upon to create under great amounts of stress and tight deadlines. We will also discuss the ways in which a team should prepare to work with the manual. We will elaborate on the right and wrong way to use crisis scenario training. Finally, we provide a sample table of contents that will empower the reader to start right away with the preparations for his or her own crisis communications manual.

1. THE SCOPE OF THE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS MANUAL

It is vital to understand what a crisis communications manual is. Equally important is to understand what it is not. Every company or organization that is hit by a serious incident typically has three processes that will need to be implemented simultaneously: disaster recovery (searching for survivors, helping wounded, repairing what is damaged), business continuity (arranging for the continuity of production or service) and crisis communications (communication about the crisis to internal and external audiences).

The crisis communications manual will only focus on the latter. Of course the manual will contain plugs (the main one being the communication line with the crisis management team) through which the crisis communication team can be fed information on the actual crisis and share updates with other actors within the organization.

2. THE COMPONENTS OF THE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS MANUAL

A. Guiding principles

At Swyft, we apply our own **4C approach** when we conduct a quick scan of a crisis communications manual. A manual must have clarity, be consistent, complete and current.

Clarity

Is it completely clear in the crisis communications manual what the roles of each of the actors are? Is there any ambiguity or imprecision of language that could lead somebody to make an erroneous interpretation that could lead to different, unintended results? Are all abbreviations used in the crisis communications manual well known for all the users? Are the terms used understandable to all team members, even for non-native speakers? Even though a crisis communications manual is not a regular piece of prose, it will read quite closely during a crisis and should stand up to a post-crisis review by executives. What's more, every subject category or section needs to stand on its own; readers can ill afford to waste time scanning a dense document in search of an abbreviation definition.

Consistent

Is there consistency throughout the crisis communications manual in terms of how tools, processes and resources are referenced? For example, the name of the crisis communication team should not co-exist with alternate versions such as crisis communication group, crisis team or any other than standard names. The consistency in wording might appear to be of lesser importance at first sight, but any exercise and real life execution of the manual will be fraught with misunderstandings (and thus mistakes) if terminology is not followed to the letter.

Complete

A question to ask yourself is will your crisis communications manual be self-standing or will it end up referring to content from other sources, say a website or different procedure manual? No crisis communications team will be served well by having to scramble, under intense pressure internal and external stakeholders, in a desperate search for files, message scripts, or media contact information, especially since that information can easily be integrated in the manual. Being complete does not mean turning your manual into a massive document from which information is not easily retrievable. The table of contents in section 5 will serve as an example of how information can be organized effectively in the manual.

Current

Are the cell phone numbers for Joe and Lisa in the manual the same ones they use today? Is the expert on product safety who you will need to talk to in one of your crisis scenarios still on the job or has he or she been replaced? A crisis communications manual that is not kept up to date at least quarterly is a potential liability. The staff member who receives the ownership for 'soft updates' can also be the person who wrote the manual in the first place; but any member of the media relations team is capable of handling the task.

B. Actors in crisis communications

The starring role in company media crisis communications is taken by the crisis communications team. This team is comprised of communications professionals who take on different roles during a crisis. Typical roles taken within the crisis communications team are:

- Team leader: leads the team and reports to the senior communications executive in the crisis management team
- Liaison officer: liaises with other internal and external professionals and teams to update them and receive their input (e.g., a liaison officer will engage with first responders and an external communications agency consulting on the crisis)

- First responder: the first one to go onsite and address immediate media needs
- Note taker: takes notes of inbound media calls, which in turn enables the spokesperson to call back journalists with a well-prepared response
- Action logger: keeps track on which actions were undertaken at what time by the crisis communications team
- Social media professional: posts updates on social media channels and monitors conversations
- Website publisher: keeps the (dark) site current[1]
- Internal communications professional: distributes updates on the crisis to staff
- Spokesperson: gives interviews to journalists and coaches the CEO prior to him/her giving interviews
- Monitoring agent: keeps track of what appears in print and online press about the crisis
- Copywriter: writes press releases and other useful media copy

It goes without saying that often an organization will not have the luxury of having a staff in place for every single slot. It is useful to define beforehand which staff are best equipped for which roles so that the team leader is empowered to make decisions about who should take on additional tasks.

THE MANUAL SHOULD CLEARLY DESCRIBE WHAT IS EXPECTED FROM EACH TEAM MEMBER.

The manual should clearly describe what is expected from each team member. Often manuals will also make a list of the steps that the team leader should take in the first hour in the crisis, often referred to as the 'Golden Hour' in crisis communications circles.

Organizations will show variations in the way they choose to put people from different communication disciplines together in one crisis communications team. In any case: having the staff that cater to the information needs of key constituents work closely together will only benefit the effort of communicating consistently to those audiences during the crisis.

[1] Dark sites or blogs are dormant online real estate that only becomes active and visible online during an actual crisis. One industry that has seen widespread use of dark web resources is the airline industry.

Another important actor in crisis communications is the crisis management team. This team is composed of senior management, often including the CEO, and makes the important calls on the three aforementioned crisis management tracks: disaster recovery, business continuity and crisis communications. A typical decision related to communications is the messaging strategy: how does the organization want to explain the crisis (self-inflicted, act of God, criminal act, etc.)? One member of this team, typically the member of the Board of Directors that is responsible for corporate communications, advises the crisis management team on the course to take in media relations. The head of the crisis communications team reports to him or her to ensure he or she is kept up to date on the media outreach; this person also ensures that any decisions by the crisis management team on crisis communications are executed.

C. Content of the manual

Any crisis communications manual will have to cover the people that will do the work, the processes that need to be followed and the resources that can be deployed.

a. People

The manual should list the communications staff that will be called upon during a crisis. Because people can be sick or on vacation when a crisis happens there should be a backup in place for every slot. To ensure adequate staffing for mission critical roles related to crisis readiness a special attention must be paid to planned holidays and work travel of people listed for activation during a crisis. In other words, there should never be an overlap in the absence of mission critical crisis communications staff.

b. Processes

Every crisis communication manual needs processes for initial crisis notification, escalation and validation:

- Notification: how is a crisis notified internally so that senior executives who will be called upon to manage the crisis are informed of it in a timely manner? In the case of an operational crisis it will be just a matter of plugging communications into the incident reporting process, but for a reputational crisis the communications department will be on its own for making sure there are adequate brand monitoring tools in place to pick up the threat before it goes viral.

- Escalation: who decided when the organization is in a crisis in the first place? Who decides subsequently whether the crisis communications team needs to be assembled? And who makes the call to say the crisis is 'officially' over? A clear definition of the responsibilities of each senior staff will help avoid confusion on who is supposed to do what.

- Validation: who gives the final approval for a press release that goes out? Who validates other decisions or deliverables of the communications staff? Again, clear rules will avoid people pulling rank or making unapproved communications that could potentially prolong or deepen the crisis.

c. Resources

The crisis communications manual makes an inventory of the available resources and contains precise information on how to employ them:

- PR support (external agency or agencies)
- Other vendors (wire service, catering service, an external venue,...)
- Internal experts (they become part of the 'knowledge map')
- Templates for holding statements and press releases
- Media distribution list
- Facts and figures on the organization

[2] Holding statements are the short statements issued by organizations who are still scrambling to collect data on what happened. They precede the distribution of press releases.

3. REHEARSING THE MANUAL

No crisis communications manual is of any use to a team of communications professionals if that team does not rehearse the execution of the procedures laid out in the plan at least once a year. Here we list the different ways through which teams can be prepared for crisis communications. We list the training formats in the order of the sequence through which they should take place: from awareness creating workshops to short drills that focus on specific processes of the manual.

Crisis workshop

The crisis workshop is a workshop through which management aims to introduce key principles of crisis communications to the communications professionals who will be called upon to both help build the crisis communication response plan and deliver it when a crisis erupts. This is typically a first step in raising awareness about the importance of crisis communications with key internal audiences.

Walkthrough exercise

A walk through exercise is geared towards senior communication professionals who will need to make decisions during a crisis. They are confronted with a mock crisis and are asked what kind of communication decisions they would take at the different steps. Both tactics (which resources and tools to use? when?) and strategy (should we apologize? should we downplay?) are discussed.

Desktop exercise

A desktop exercise revolves around a scenario just like a walk through exercise does, but with one big difference and that is that the exercises takes place in real time. Typically a desktop exercise takes place with the entire crisis communications team, and the person to whom the team will be

Simulation exercise

A full blown simulation exercise takes place in real time and involves the simulated play of a great many internal and external actors. Often companies will choose to rehearse all 3 mentioned tracks during the simulation exercise, meaning that emergency services will be deployed as well. Make sure to have a neighborhood notification program in place beforehand if if your scenario involves public facing activities so that nobody gets unnecessarily worried (or starts calling the media!).

Drill

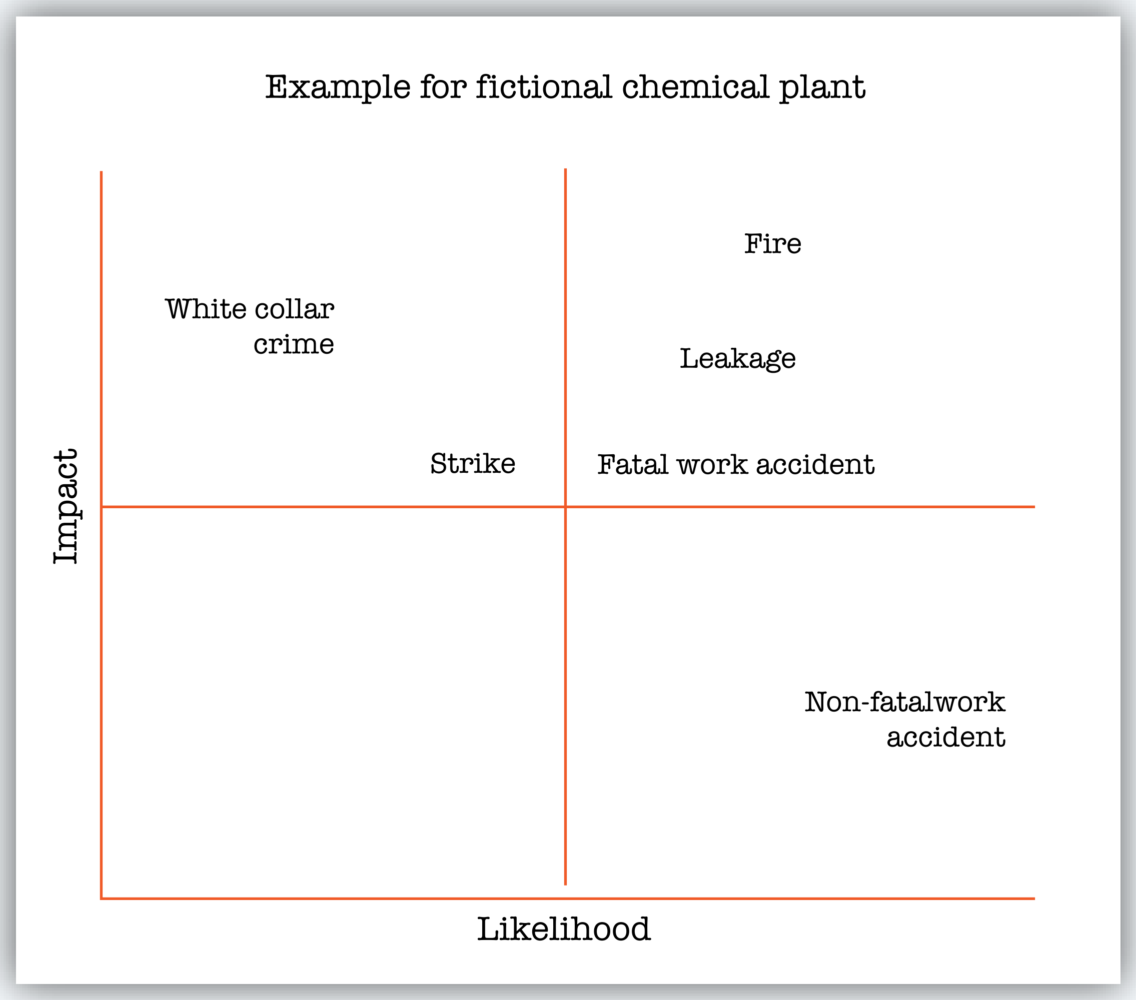
A drill is a short exercise meant to test the readiness for one specific process laid out in the crisis communications manual. For example: the early notification of a crisis and activation of all communication lines within the organization that are needed for the crisis communications team to start its work.

NOTE: Any facilitator of crisis communications exercises should be careful to not rush through the sequence of trainings described above. Teams that are ill prepared and/or insufficiently made aware of the importance of efficient crisis communications will perform badly during exercises, which in turn will negatively impact their motivation and acceptance of the crisis preparedness roadmap that you have laid out for them.

4. USE AND MISUSE OF SCENARIOS

Thinking about any and all possible crisis scenarios is an essential first step management must take to prepare an organization to address business continuity, disaster recovery and crisis communications. This exercise can appear daunting at first blush but does not have to be, especially if you employ a risk assessment matrix like the one illustrated below.

Any potential crisis events should be mapped on this graph using two variables: the likelihood than an adverse event will occur and the impact that the event would have on the organization. Clearly, the events in the high likelihood - high impact quadrant are the ones that the organization will dread most. Management will be justified in focusing more of its training on these high-likelihood, high-impact scenarios. Going through a similar risk assessment mapping exercise will show a different mix of possible scenarios for every industry, but even within industries the differences between companies can be significant. It isn’t necessary to prepare for every single scenario imaginable but it certainly makes sense to be more prepared for the high-likelihood, high-impact events.



[This shows an example of a fictional chemical plant.]

Scenario based exercises can be a boon to organizations, but a word of warning is warranted. Crises tend to be highly idiosyncratic insofar as their communications challenges are concerned. Crisis communications professionals should make good use of scenarios in preparing for what can go wrong, but never fall prey to over scripting their crisis responses. Many crisis communications manuals will contain templates in which staff just need to fill in the blanks on specific details ('… people got hurt today on our production site.'). This level of scripting gives a false sense of security to a communications team and may end up being wholly inadequate at addressing the huge variety of challenges each crisis represents. The organization would be far better served by having its communications professionals acquire the precise knowledge and skills needed to make the right tactical and strategic choices for every very unique crisis that comes their way.

5. SAMPLE TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Crisis communications team
    a. Roles & responsibilities
    b. Composition
2. Crisis management team
    a. Roles & responsibilities
    b. Compositio
3. Processes
    a. Initial crisis notification to the communications department
    b. Activation of the crisis communications team
    c. Validation of crisis communications deliverables and decisions
4. Resources
    a. Conference call lines
    b. Wire service
    c. Social media
    d. Website
    e. PR consultancy support
    f. Catering services
    g. Hospitality services
5. Knowledge map
6. Template
    a. Press release
    b. Holding statement[3]
    c. Media call sheet
    d. Action log sheet
    e. Post mortem evaluation sheet
7. Supplements
    a. Facts and figures about the organization
    b. General media distribution list

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[3] A holding statement is a short statement that can be shared with the media as the organization is still scrambling to collect information on what happened. The use of a holding statement precedes the distribution of press releases.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Detavernier has 12+ years of corporate communications experience in top-tier consultancy agencies in the Brussels market. Armed with advanced degrees in Marketing and Management including a Masters from Ghent University, Jo has counseled clients like Weight Watchers, Unilever, Pfizer and Boston Consulting Group on all manner of media strategies. His competencies include B2B and B2C public relations, issue and crisis communications, content marketing and C-suite media training.

Jo landed his clients in some of the best known media outlets in Europe and America including Bloomberg, Le Figaro and Der Spiegel. Jo directs client engagements and provides project management oversight, campaign design and invaluable message development for clients. A Belgian by birth, Jo enjoys expounding upon the virtues of Belgian chocolate, that is when he's not expounding upon the virtues of Belgian Trappist beers, Belgian soccer or Belgian cooking. Jo is fluent in English, Dutch and French.

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