Action: During a crisis

Your team has determined to examine whether a public health crisis warrants a response from your organization. You'll want to activate your team and assess the threat.

1. Activate response strategy

Assemble the response team as decided and agreed upon in your Crisis Communication Plan. The team will need to determine whether or how to act.

2. Conduct a threat assessment

The first step to strategic, intentional and responsible communications is assessment. Before anything, audit the situation. Understand where your crisis information is coming from and weigh the risks of responding or not responding —risks for your association, partners, or communities being served.

Verification

Get a clear sense of the origin of the information prompting you to consider activating crisis communications. Ask:[1]

- Is the source credible?
- Is it from a formal or informal channel, and can it be confirmed?

By taking time to source the information, you play an active role in reducing the spread of misinformation.



1 Based on CDC CERC Crisis Communication Plans pages 33 and 35.

Assessing the threat

If you've confirmed that the information comes from a legitimate and credible source, you will then run a threat assessment. This is a series of questions that help you decide whether your organization needs to activate a crisis communication response protocol. Assessing the threat is key to maintaining intentional communications and minimizing reactivity.

Ask:

- Does the situation directly affect our organization, and the people or communities we serve?
- Does it impede our mission?
- Does it pose danger or threaten to harm anyone? If so, who, and how?
- Do we have a necessary and credible role to play in addressing this situation?
- Do we have a responsibility to address this situation?
- Is there a potential risk to our people, operations, or reputation if we stay silent? If so, what is the nature of that risk?
- Is there misinformation spreading that we are well-positioned to clarify?
- Will our audiences or stakeholders (internal and/or external) expect us to address the situation?
- Do we have accurate, verified information to share?

If you answer YES to two or more of these questions, activate your crisis communication response protocol. If you've answered YES to one of these questions, and there is no immediate danger to the organization or the communities it serves, then consider keeping an eye on the situation. You may feel the need to activate a response team in the future.

There are also scenarios where your organization is not best positioned to respond. Consider asking a partner organization for their help, or offer to support their response efforts.

Once the team determines a response is warranted, you'll need to….

3. Develop Communications

Define communication objectives

The broad goal for any crisis communication is to reduce confusion, correct misinformation, and demonstrate leadership.

With that in mind, your team will need to decide the key goals of the crisis communication effort at hand.

Ask: *What do you want to achieve by responding?* Do you need to set the record straight (misinformation)? Minimize exposure (outbreaks and contamination)? Direct people to resources (extreme weather)?

Audience

Determine your priority audience. Whether it is a specific community, the local media, or association members, remember that your communications will ultimately land in front of the general public. Because time is critical, choose one audience to focus on so you can get that messaging right. Once your priority audience has been addressed, you can move on to others if time and capacity allows.

Call to Action



Your call to action is an important part of your messaging that **states what your audience needs to do in order to reduce risk for themselves and others** and identifies the defined crisis communication objective. More than anything, this is what you want your audience to take away from their interaction with your communications.

Use the *head-heart-hands* approach to determine what you want from your audience, and how it serves the response goal.

- **Head:** Are you trying to establish credibility as a source of information?
- **Heart:** Are you trying to connect/feel at a personal level?
- **Hands:** Are you trying to activate or do something?

Keeping your ask clear and to-the-point will encourage more participation.

Easy to use framework for a call to action (CTA):

1. **The "One-Action" Rule:** Give exactly one primary thing to do per message.
2. **Remove obstacles to act:** Don't make your audience search for the action you want them to take. For example, if you want them to visit a website, provide a direct, clickable link (or a short, easy-to-type URL).
3. **Be specific with time and place:** Instead of saying, "Check back later," say "Our next verified update will be posted here at 4 p.m. EST."

How you message your CTA will be informed by the type of situation at hand. Understanding the action needed, along with who your audience is, will help you develop this in a way that resonates and drives action. Values-based messaging is important here.

Messaging

Get clear on what you need to say. This doesn't necessarily mean what YOU think needs to be said. Rather, consider this question: "What do people need or want to know about what's happened?"

Note: It's okay not to have all the answers upfront. You can always say that you are assessing the situation and gathering information and tell them you will circle back as soon as you can.

Knowing your audience and what motivates them is key here. If you want more information about messaging to specific audiences and emergencies, see page 4 of CERC's primary audience concerns.

Decide how to answer these key questions:

- Why is this a risk, and how serious is it?
  - Who's impacted and how?
- What's the most important thing to know right now? *(This includes how your organization and partners are course-correcting, if an internal misstep is part of the conversation.)*
  - What's being done currently and what happens next?
  - Do people need to do anything?
  - Where can they go to learn more?

Example

The de Beaumont Foundation shares important points about conveying public health information:

- Use plain, everyday language and avoid complex medical terms when you can.
- Use short sentences and start with the most important information.
- Use an active voice so it's clear who is taking action. For example, say, "X organization collected the data," rather than saying, "The data was collected by X."
- Use "you" to speak directly to your audience.

Depending on the situation, take time to consider what opposing messages are also being shared. It's important to address those messages and redirect people with the verified information you have.

Assess and assemble assets

Before developing any new material intended to support or supplement your message, audit what you already have available to you. Depending on capacity, this can be listed and kept updated within a crisis communication plan itself. Assess current content and decide if it can help deliver on your particular crisis response objective, either for use as-is, with modifications, or to inform new material.

You may already have topic-related communications such as:

- A position statement
- Content on your website or social media account
- A fact sheet
- A past press release

Use these materials as a launching pad. It will save time drafting while also helping you remain consistent in your position.

Also, consider the format. See if your existing materials can be adapted for specific communication channels so that you don't keep reinventing the wheel (e.g., Can parts of your factsheet be tailored for social media use?).



4. Engaging partners

Messenger

Successfully communicating your crisis response and achieving its communication objectives is just as much about *who* shares the message as it is about the message itself. Your messaging and materials will resonate most effectively if presented by a person or organization that your audience accepts and trusts.

That will not always be the Executive Director or another senior member of your organization. It could be a community and business leader, a partner organization, or someone else, depending on the scenario. Messengers trusted by your audience are especially important to leverage in situations where misinformation is persistent.

Depending on the scenario and relationship, your messenger may help you hone your message to ensure audience acceptance.

Ongoing stakeholder updates

Separate from your audience outreach, someone on your response team will be responsible for keeping your association's stakeholders informed and updated regularly. This could be a Board of Directors, funders, or internal staff.

If you are part of a coalition, make sure that those organizations are also informed about the situation and your decision to respond, and ask for alignment on their part. Sharing conflicting messages during a crisis will exacerbate the crisis.

Staying on message with the media

Being prepared to navigate opposing messages and even opposition is especially important when you are interacting with the media. Have key points ready and practice redirecting questions. Importantly, stay calm, listen and don't rush your response.

Example position statements, from CERC:

- **Flagging:** *"What's important is to remember…"*
- **Bridging:** *"I can't answer that question, but I can tell you…"*
- **Reframing:** *"Let me put that in perspective…"*
- **Closing: "***Before I forget, I want to tell your viewers…"*

By systematically assessing the threat, identifying strategic communication objectives and engaging trusted partners, your organization can execute a response that is intentional, timely and credible. This structured approach helps minimize confusion and upholds public trust.

Worksheets

- Threat assessment
- Defining messaging objectives
- Developing effective messaging
- Media practice