

# Crisis Communications

Practical tips for navigating challenging events

NEO Conference  
December 6, 2022

**Libby Catalinich, APR**  
Director, Pierce County Communications



[Libby.Catalinich@PierceCountyWa.gov](mailto:Libby.Catalinich@PierceCountyWa.gov)



253-798-6606

# What's a crisis?





# Dupont Trail Derailment



# Plane Downed on Ketron Island

*Photo courtesy of John Waldron, CNN*



# Facebook Outage



Twitter   
@Twitter

hello literally everyone

10:27 AM · Oct 4, 2021 · Sprinklr

417.4K Retweets

139.4K Quote Tweets

2.1M Likes

 Pinned Tweet



Facebook App   
@facebookapp

...

We're aware that some people are having trouble accessing Facebook app. We're working to get things back to normal as quickly as possible, and we apologize for any inconvenience.

9:16 PM · 04/10/2021 · Twitter Web App

A photograph of a two-lane asphalt road with a yellow double line, curving through a green, hilly landscape. On the right side of the road, there is a large, deep sinkhole or erosion pit. The road surface is cracked and broken at the edge of the sinkhole. The surrounding terrain is covered in green grass and some bare earth. The overall scene suggests a rural or less developed area.

Many crises start out as issues that can and should be anticipated

A crisis versus an issue

# Best practices overview



1. Anticipate crises
2. Identify your crisis communications team
3. Identify and train spokespersons
4. Develop holding statements
5. Establish notification and monitoring systems
6. Identify and know your stakeholders

# Before a Crisis Hits





## Start with preparing for likely scenarios

- Select the most likely or most damaging
- Draft initial messaging to tide you over



## Beyond Natural Disasters

- Death of the executive
- Financial malfeasance
- Workplace violence



## Latent Negatives

**Predictable crises based on what you do**

- REI sells equipment that can kill you
- Banking is vulnerable to customer data breaches, lending issues
- Geography can dictate
  - We are currently meeting in the shadow of an active volcano!

# Anticipate crises

1. Accidents, Violence & Other Disasters
  - Act of Violence\_with injuries\_death
  - Auto Accident\_Employee misconduct
  - Auto Accident\_Major\_No injures
  - Automobile Accident with injuries\_death
  - BioTerrorism with Injury\_Death
  - Bomb Exploded\_No injuries
  - Bomb Exploded\_with injuries or death
  - Bomb Threat or Bomb Found
  - Hazardous Materials Accident\_with injury\_death
  - Haz-Mat\_Emergency
  - Human\_Hostage\_Incident
  - Human\_Hostage\_Incident\_Injuries
  - Major\_Power\_Outage
  - Potential Disease or Illness
  - Riots-Internal or External
  - Site-specific\_Non-Natural\_Disaster
  - Site-specific\_Non-Natural\_Disaster\_Injuries
  - Train\_or\_Plane Accident
  - Violence at Facility

# Anticipate crises

2. Donations Issues
  - Donation of Suspicious Item
  - Donations-Employee Theft
  - Donations – Negative Perception
  - Donations Left Outside\_Theft
  - Donations Left Outside\_Ruin
  
3. Employee & HR Issues
  - Diversity Issues
  - EEO\_Lawsuit
  - Embezzlement\_Theft\_Fraud
  - Employee Job\_Related Injury\_Death
  - Employee Non-Work Fatality
  - Employee Unrest
  - Employee\_Applicant Discrimination
  - Employee\_Misconduct
  - Employing Undocumented\_Immigrants
  - Picket Line

# Anticipate crises



4. Financial or Fundraising Issues
  - Criminal\_Activity\_Fraud
  - Financial\_IRS Issues
  - Financial Impropriety
  - Financial Mismanagement
5. Natural Disasters
  - After\_during\_natural\_disaster\_weather\_no injuries
  - After\_natural\_disaster\_weather\_injuries or death
  - Earthquake\_no\_injuries
  - Earthquake\_with\_injuries\_death
  - Preceding\_natural\_disaster\_weather\_event
6. Operational & Technology Issues
  - Banking\_Technology\_Failure
  - Data\_Theft-Identity\_Theft
  - Technology\_Failure\_Data\_Loss

# Anticipate crises



7. Organizations & Regulatory Issues
  - Regulatory\_Failure to Comply
8. Partner Agency Issues
  - Constituent Agency\_failure to perform
  - Partner Agency\_Bad Publicity
9. PR General
  - Misuse of Name
  - Criticism of Parent Organization
10. Program Issues
  - Criticism ExOffender Program

# Anticipate crises



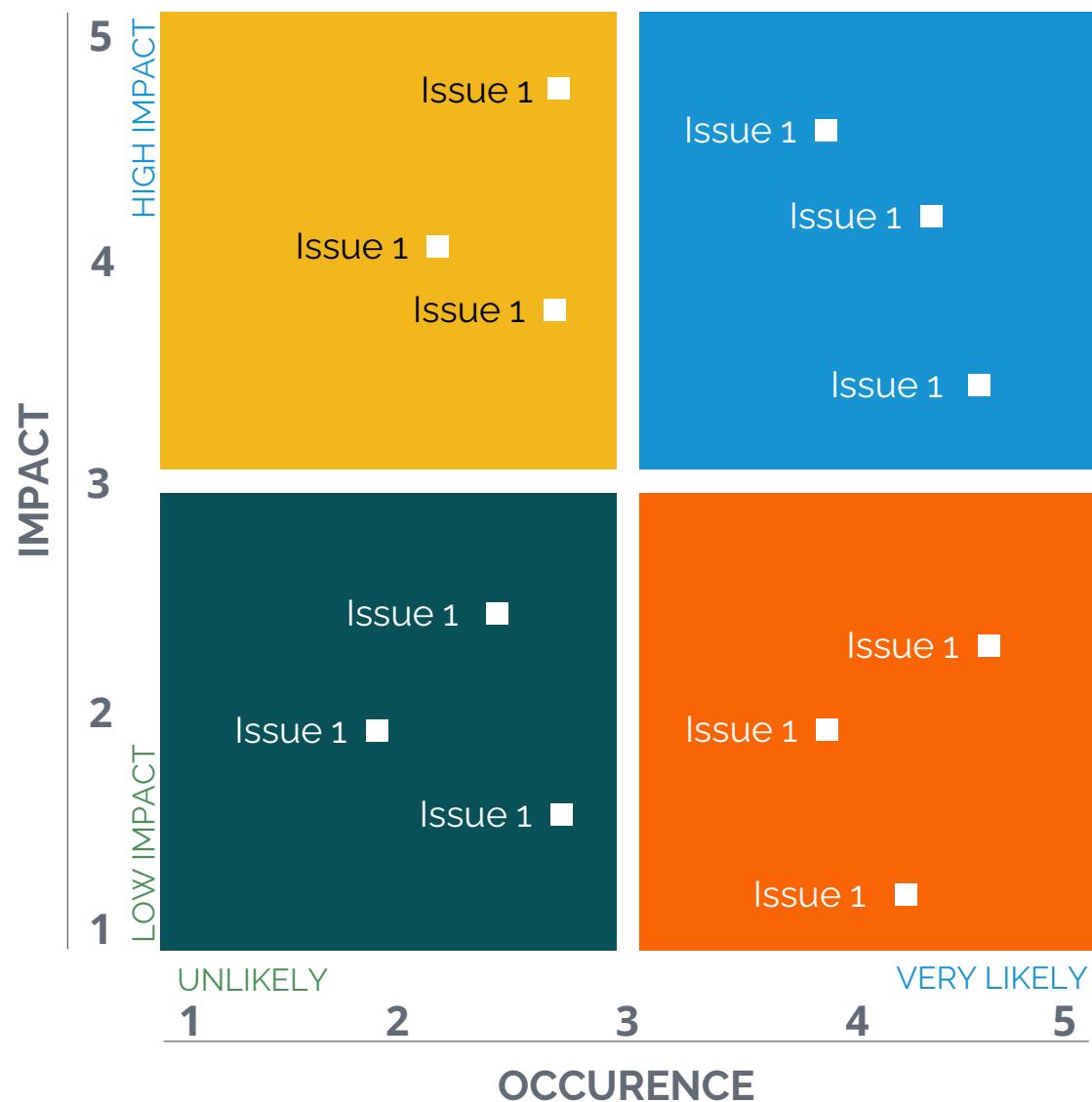
11. Retail Store, Facility & Customer Issues
  - Child Kidnapping
  - Criticism\_Ebay, Pricing, Computers
  - Customer Injury\_Death
  - Public Theft from Store
  - Retail Issues\_Misconduct
  - Retail\_Recalled Product Sold\_No Injury
  - Retail\_Recalled Product Sold\_with injury\_death
  - Robbery\_Injuries or Fatalities
  - Robbery\_No Injuries
  - Specific Item New Recall

# Issue assessment



Likelihood of occurrence x Severity of Impact = Score  
Institutional controls

# Issue heat map





## Identify Roles

- County officials
- Councilmembers or Commissioners
- Law enforcement
- Prosecutor's Office

# Crisis Management Team



- The purpose of the CMT is to have a group of leaders who are prepared for and ready to respond to an incident.
- The CMT is responsible for high-level impact assessment, decision-making, oversight, and resource approval.
- The CMT will guide and support business continuity and recovery teams through an incident.



# Crisis Management Team

The responsibilities of the CMT at time of incident include:

- Oversee response to a large-scale disaster or incident
- Activate department Business Continuity Plans (BCP)
- Work to ensure employee and resident health and safety
- Make workplace recovery decisions
- Allocate resources among recovering department BC Teams
- Coordinate efforts between response and recovery teams
- Approve incident-related purchases
- Lead communication and information flow

# Crisis Process and Protocols



- Create a step-by-step process
- Understood by all who will be activated
- Digitize tools as not everyone will have the full plan with them
- Have paper back-ups in case of power outages or a loss of technology



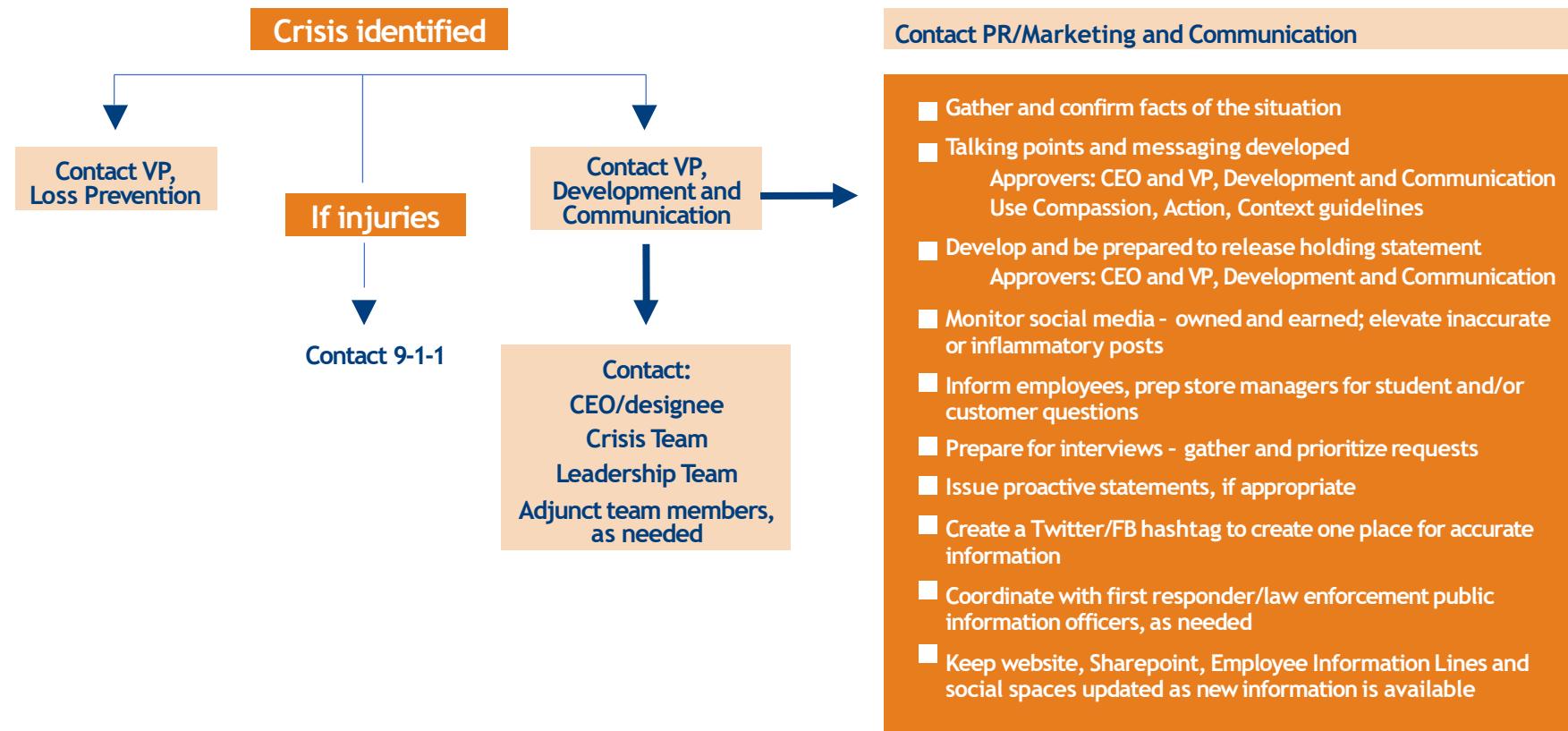
# Sample Wallet Card

Step 1: Assess Impact – Asset Protection
1. First Responder notifies appropriate help (fire, police, etc.).
2. Immediate actions are taken to protect employees, customers, and guests.
3. <b>First Responder notifies PA</b> via the pager.
4. <b>Asset Protection alerted by PA</b> and determines next steps.
5. CMT Leader will be notified if:
• Employees and/or customers have suffered serious injuries or fatalities or there is a threat to their safety)
• Significant business disruption
• Significant reputational risk
• Large-scale impact from natural or man-made disasters
• Threat of or actual violence
• Full activation of any department Business Continuity Plan or to IT Disaster Recovery Plan
Step 2: Alert CMT Leader
1. Once the CMT Leader is informed of incident, he will determine whether the rest of the CMT should be notified or activated. In addition, emergency notification system may be activated, depending on event circumstances.
2. In a <b>notification</b> situation- CMT stands by and prepares to activate if the incident escalates; <b>OR</b> if CMT is <b>activated</b> , CMT Leader follows steps 3 – 7 below.
3. Secure a meeting location:
• During work hours and HQ Campus not impacted, use Mt. Rainier Conference Room
• If HQ not available, use alternate Emergency Operations Center (EOC) (see EOC box on right)
• If outside work hours or remote meeting is required, use CMT Conference Line #1
• If HQ building is evacuated, go to your assigned Evacuation Assembly Area to check in; confirm alternative EOC

Step 3: Initiate CMT conference call or meeting
1. Dial CMT Conference Line #1 for primary locations; <b>OR</b>
2. Meet at designated EOC
Step 4: Incident meeting
1. Use predefined meeting Agenda.
2. CMT Leader to provide an overview of the situation.
3. Discuss event details, human impacts, business impacts, action items and determine schedule for update meetings/conference calls.
Step 5: Assess need to implement recovery strategies
1. Decide if the incident is a “disaster” – if yes, activate department Business Continuity Plans and recovery sites.
2. For high impact, non-disaster events, create appropriate working teams.
3. Establish ongoing communication with CMT members, Leadership Forum, Board, activated department teams, and employees according to crisis level and with support from Public Affairs.
4. Implement communication strategies to inform and address relevant internal and external stakeholders.
Step 6: Implement event response tasks
1. Follow prioritization goals: (1) Keep people safe and pay them; (2) Maintain near-normal operations at stores and online; (3) Maintain cash flow and product flow; (4) Recover the business.
Step 7: Close event
1. Debrief and capture lessons learned.

Crisis Numbers
• PA Pager 1.206.XXX.XXXX
• Employee Hotline 1.888.XXX.XXXX
• Employee Service Center 1.800.XXX.XXXX
CMT Conference Lines
<b>Main Conference Line #1:</b> Support and Communications Team 1.866.XXX.XXXX Pin: XXXXXX Optional Leader Code: XXXXXX
<i>Breakout teams use:</i> <b>Conference Line #2:</b> Business Operations Team 1.866.XXX.XXXX Pin: XXXXXX Optional Leader Code: XXXX
<b>Conference Line #3:</b> Business/Systems Recovery Team 1.XXX.XXX.XXXX Pin: XXXXXX Optional Leader Code: XXXXXX
Emergency Operations Centers
Primary: Anderson Bldg – 253. XXX.XXXX Mt. Rainier Conference Room HQ Campus
Alternate #1: Seattle Store – 206.XXX.XXXX Door Code XXX Address
Alternate #2: Sumner DC – XXX.XXX.XXXX Dragontail Peak Conference Room Address

# Sample process



# Process questions



- Who is accountable for your plan?
  - Emergency management?
  - Executive's Office?
  - Communications?
- What are the legal ramifications of the situation?
  - Consider liability and insurance considerations
- What is the priority order for communication during a crisis?
- Who receives a copy of your crisis communication plan?
- How do you communicate if the Internet goes down or power goes out?

# Crisis Preparation



## *Prepare Channels*

- Social Media
- Website
- Prepare "dark site"
- Media
- Employees
- Other stakeholders
- Emergency notification systems - Text
  - Everbridge (PC Alert, PC WARN)
  - MIR 3
  - Others

# Crisis Preparation

## Identify stakeholders



Pierce County

- County residents
- County health department
- County elected leadership
- County administration
- County fire departments
- Pierce County Sheriff's Department
- Health care community (hospitals, doctors, nurses, etc.)
- Civic organizations and unions
- Tribes
- Business and community leaders
- Community-based organizations
- Homeless shelters
- Assisted living facilities
- School districts
- Local Parent Teacher Associations
- Ethnic organizations
- Statewide, regional and local general and ethnic media
- Joint Base Lewis-McChord leadership

# Who has been left out?

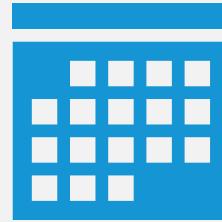
- Equity and inclusion during a crisis
- Language barriers
- Needs of disabled residents – sight or hearing impairments must be addressed
- Access barriers – not everyone uses social media
- Trusted messengers can be important advocates

# Crisis Preparation



Media  
Training

# Crisis Preparation



**Test plan quarterly**

# During a crisis



# Context

- In our world today:
  - **Speed** is everything
  - Real-time tweeting and posting pushes **quick decisions** and approvals
- Seek out ways to enhance or **burnish your organization's reputation**
- Be clear on your **relevant practices, policies and regulations**
- Do the alleged actions align with or conflict with them?
- Rather than asking if coverage was “positive,” evaluate coverage for accuracy, **key message pick up**, tone and public commentary

# During a crisis

## Using a Joint Information Center

- A JIC can augment your communications team or serve as one
- Research Team oversees preparation of news releases, daily summaries, media advisories, feature articles, fact sheets, public service announcements, and other written materials;
- Media Operations oversees responses to incoming media calls, provides information on latest developments, answers inquiries, monitors news coverage, manages news conferences, assesses public opinions, beliefs, and current knowledge, and provides background information on response activities; and
- Logistics Team ensures all JIC functions are operating efficiently, and supervises all operational and administrative activities, including staffing and inter-office communications.

# During a crisis

## Social Media

- Don't let pace of social media to force you into saying or doing things out of haste
- Make sure you have someone assigned to monitor for tone and accuracy
- Authorize them to reply, if needed
- Create a hashtag to allow media and interested people to follow and receive updates

# During a crisis

## Messaging

- Acknowledge situation
- Identify priorities
- Confirm available facts
- Express concern
- Do not speculate
- Refer to authorities, as appropriate
- Remember: “Compassion, Action, Context”

# During a crisis

## Media interviews

### What to avoid:

- Showing frustration
- Repeating negatives
- Speculating
- Going "off the record"

### How to take control:

- Remain calm
- Use active listening
- Embrace the pause
- Use bridging techniques

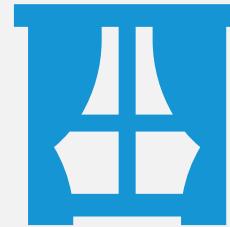
# During a crisis

## Bridging

*A transition comment that allows you to use your key messages:*

- What's important to keep in mind is.....
- I don't have those details at this point but what I can tell you is....
- What we know right now is....
- We don't comment on pending litigation but...

## Transparency



- Ferry App Potential Breach



## Accountability

- Credit monitoring offer



## Honesty

- Building near collapse



## Be Proactive

- Layoffs



## Integrity

- Act in the best interests of those involved

# After a crisis



# After a crisis



*Once you are safely past a crisis:*

1. Assess the current state
2. Update and adapt key messages
3. Post-crisis analysis
  1. Reflect on lessons learned
  2. Identify gaps and opportunities
4. Refine and strengthen crisis protocols

# Need help?



**FEMA**

**LinkedIn Learning**

## Your Community Partners

  
MRSC  
Empowering local governments  
The logo for MRSC (Metropolitan Regional Planning Council) features a stylized green and blue swoosh graphic followed by the acronym "MRSC" in blue, with the tagline "Empowering local governments" in a smaller, gray font below it.  
Google  
The Google logo in its signature blue, red, yellow, and green colors.

# Questions?