In the previous two chapters, we defined crisis communication and determined that uncertainty is a key communication challenge for crisis communicators. This chapter builds upon these ideas by focusing on how to effectively communicate during a crisis. Over the past 20 years, a considerable amount of crisis communication research has been conducted. Some of the more recent research focuses on best practices that investigate strategies to help organizations effectively respond to a crisis. This chapter defines these best practices in crisis communication. We believe that an effective response to a crisis can turn what could be a disaster for an organization into an opportunity to move beyond the event and to grow and prosper.

This chapter contains 10 lessons for effective crisis communication. These lessons should give any crisis communicator the key elements of an effective crisis response. The lessons, culled from numerous case studies and research on crisis communication, address a multitude of issues. Some of the lessons—such as determining your goals, for example—can be accomplished quite quickly and easily. Other lessons, such as managing stakeholder relationships, can be much more complex and time consuming. You may even be surprised by some of the
advice we provide in this chapter. For instance, we discuss seriously considering the use of clear and accurate communication in your initial crisis response. In addition, we provide some advice about overassuring stakeholders. These lessons may appear somewhat counterintuitive. Nevertheless, research has consistently revealed these strategies to be effective means for managing crises.

**DETERMINING YOUR GOALS**

One of the first things crisis communicators need to determine following a crisis is the goal of their crisis response. Goals are often broad value statements that can help guide decision making for the organization. One goal of crisis communication can be to reduce the impact of the crisis on those affected. Another goal of crisis communicators may be to keep their organization’s image intact or maintain their customer base. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently adopted the goals of “Be first, be right, be credible” for their crisis communication (Reynolds, 2002). These broad goals provide clear objectives for how the CDC would like to communicate during a crisis. In essence, the CDC’s objective during a crisis is to establish contact with stakeholders quickly and credibly. Determining goals is a key step in preparing for and responding to crisis. This strategy can also reduce uncertainty for the organization because, once goals are defined, the organization is better able to consciously think about what strategies it can use in order to accomplish its objectives.

Some of an organization’s crisis communication goals may actually contradict one another. For instance, public health departments typically have a key goal of informing the public about health crises. However, at times, they are not able to meet this goal due to individual right-to-privacy laws that prohibit such communication. Determining, ranking, and identifying potential obstacles to goals of crisis communication before a crisis is a key step in effective crisis communication. We hope that when organizations prepare for crises, they consider their crisis communication goals. In addition, we believe that they should collaborate with other groups, work out potential goal conflicts, and establish partnerships.

**PARTNERING WITH CRISIS AUDIENCES**

We believe that once goals for a crisis response are established, the second essential part for crisis communicators is developing a mindset
about the role of stakeholders in crisis communication. A critical part of effective crisis communication is determined by the relationships organizations have with their stakeholders. Organizations should work before a crisis to cultivate strong partnerships with stakeholders.

We define partnerships as follows:

Partnerships are equal communication relationships with groups or organizations that have an impact on an organization. Partnerships are established through honest and open dialogue about important issues for each group or organization. Partners may be advocates for the organization or they may be groups that are antagonistic toward the organization.

We believe that effective crisis communication starts long before a crisis hits an organization and should be part of every organization’s business and strategic plans. Establishing and maintaining equal relationships and partnerships with groups and organizations is critical to effective crisis communication. We do not advocate manipulating stakeholders in a way that gets them to do what you want. Rather, we believe organizations should create a dialogue with stakeholders about important issues and work out equitable solutions. This can be a time-consuming process, but it is essential to crisis preparedness and eventually your crisis response.

We advise organizations such as public health departments to partner with local media when preparing for public health crises. As we mentioned earlier, public health departments are charged with providing important health information to the communities they serve. The media are often the outlet for this communication. However, individual right-to-privacy laws often preclude public health departments from being completely transparent in their communication. This limitation can lead to frustration on the part of the media. Through open and honest discussions, public health departments can explain their positions on privacy laws, and the media can express expectations for public access to information. Our experience suggests that through these discussions, expectations can be set and uncertainty reduced about how public health departments will communicate about important health issues and how the media prefer to receive that information.

Research suggests that the public or an organization’s stakeholders can help an organization move beyond a crisis. For instance, during a 3-week period in October 2002, 10 people were shot and 3 others were
critically injured by gunfire in public places like restaurants and gas stations in Washington, DC, and Maryland. The media dubbed the killer or killers as the “beltway sniper” or “DC Sniper.” In response, the Montgomery County police chief Charles Moose actively used both the local media and the public to look for and identify the snipers. This collaboration between the different stakeholders enabled the police to widen the search for the snipers and also gave the public a role in the search. By including the media and the public as partners in the crisis, the police were able to capture the snipers after receiving two separate tips based on reported sightings of a suspect’s vehicle. In this case, the media and a vigilant public were treated as partners by law enforcement in ending the terror in Washington, DC, and Maryland. (For more information about this situation and its resolution, see “Beltway sniper,” n.d.).

Lesson 3

Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.

**UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY OF YOUR AUDIENCES**

Effective crisis communicators tend to consider the diversity of audiences they will be in contact with after a crisis rather than viewing their audience as one large, homogenous public. In Chapter 2, we defined *stakeholders* as internal or external groups that can have an impact on the organization. A list of possible stakeholders can provide a map of communication partners. For instance,

- Employees
- Competitors
- Creditors
- Consumers
- Government Agencies
- The Community
- The Environment
- Stockholders
- The Media

This list could be even larger, depending upon the organization and its interests. In order to better manage a crisis and our time in preparing for a crisis, we must determine which stakeholders the organization considers *primary* and *secondary*. 
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY
STAKEHOLDERS DEFINED

When considering the diverse nature of a single organization’s stakeholders, an understanding of primary and secondary stakeholders is essential. Heath (1997) explains that this identification of stakeholders must include both “allies-supporters and opponents” (p. 28).

**Primary stakeholders** are those groups defined by an organization as most important to its success.

**Secondary stakeholders** are key groups that do not play an active role in the day-to-day activities of the organization but are still important to its overall success.

When using the stakeholders to define organizational audiences, we then ask the following questions:

- How often do you communicate with these stakeholders?
- What groups or organizations view you as a stakeholder?
- How often do these groups communicate with you?
- Are you aware of and do you listen to the concerns of these groups?
- On which issues of importance to both primary and secondary stakeholder groups do you agree and disagree?

We find that many organizations are aware of their stakeholders but do not communicate with them or, if they do, they only converse on rare occasions. When organizations need to communicate following a crisis, they are often communicating with groups they do not know very well. This lack of familiarity exists because the organization has not established any prior relationships and has no base for the communication. If an organization does not have a partnership with stakeholders prior to a crisis, the communication following one can be quite awkward and often ineffective. Effective crisis communicators listen to their stakeholders and treat their concerns as legitimate. In addition, effective crisis communicators know the expectations of their stakeholders and their information needs following a crisis.

What is worse than not knowing your stakeholders is having a negative relationship with them. One of the most important concerns for organizations is establishing strong, positive stakeholder relationships.
At times, every organization is going to have stakeholders that are antagonistic and maybe even aggressive. That being true, organizations need to follow the classic advice: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Organizations need to work with stakeholders to narrow gaps between stakeholder and organizational expectations. Every organization will need help during a crisis, and generating goodwill with stakeholders prior to a crisis will lessen stakeholder communication demands during and after the crisis. Organizations typically do not readily address stakeholders who are adversaries. We believe that negotiating with antagonistic stakeholders over time and listening to their concerns is the key to better understanding their communication needs in the event of a crisis.

To communicate more effectively, organizations must determine the types of communication relationships or partnerships they currently have with primary stakeholders (see Table 3.1). Positive stakeholder relationships are defined as both the organization and the stakeholder viewing each other as partners. Neither party may agree on every issue, but both listen to one another and work to create agreements on issues over which they disagree. Negative stakeholder relationships develop due to poor communication between the organization and its stakeholders. The organization and the stakeholders in these groups are antagonistic toward one another. Ambivalent stakeholder relationships are defined as the organization and stakeholder engineering consent with one another. The relationship illustrates a lack of interest in one another and suggests that one group is trying to control the other. Nonexistent stakeholder relationships are defined by a lack of awareness or acknowledgement of a particular stakeholder group. In this case, the organization and its stakeholders are not even aware that they impact one another.

Lesson 4
Organizations need to develop strong primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.

A WORD ON PARTNERSHIPS AND LISTENING

Listening is critical to effective crisis communication. One of crisis communicators’ most common mistakes is attempting to engineer consent from their publics by emphasizing only the organization’s side of the story. This strategy, known as “spin,” often leaves the public feeling it does not have the full story, which creates resentment toward the organization. At worst, the organization does not even address the
When this happens, the public may be frustrated because important questions are not answered.

Listening to stakeholders is also a crucial aspect of postcrisis communication. Effective communication is not a one-way process. We advocate that, after a crisis, organizations should provide information to stakeholders but should also schedule time to listen to their concerns and to answer their questions. Listening sessions where stakeholders voice their concerns often provide the crisis-stricken organization with the opportunity to set the record straight, provide an explanation for the occurrence, or even apologize for their actions. In addition, the organization can hear stakeholder concerns at first hand. Once concerns are voiced, the organization can work to narrow the gap between what it is doing and what the public or stakeholder expects.

For some reason, listening sessions are one of the processes organizations have the most difficulty adopting. In training sessions, we often explain that organizations should keep their friendly stakeholders close and their discontented stakeholders closer. However, many organizations feel compelled to distance aggravated stakeholders and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Relationship</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Symmetrical relationships in which both organization and stakeholder understand, acknowledge, communicate, and listen effectively to one another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>An antagonistic relationship between organization and stakeholder, and organization is not open to communicating with or listening to the stakeholder group [Edits for consistency]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>No true partnership; organization and stakeholder each work to engineer consent with the other group but neither group listens to the other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonexistent</td>
<td>Organization not aware of stakeholder and does not communicate with or acknowledge the stakeholder group</td>
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communicate and listen only with stakeholders with whom they are in agreement. This, in our opinion, is an ineffective business practice. We have found that organizations are better able to prepare and respond to crises when they have coordinated with all stakeholder groups before and after the crisis. When dealing with aggravated or discontented ones, every effort should be made to address the issues as quickly as possible. Organizations should make this exercise a part of their crisis planning.

Once you have determined that listening is a key factor in effective crisis communication, the next step is to focus on determining which audiences you should listen to and how to answer their questions.

**WHAT INFORMATION DO STAKEHOLDERS NEED FOLLOWING A CRISIS?**

We offer four broad suggestions for communicating effectively following a crisis: communicating early and often to stakeholders about the crisis, identifying the cause, contacting everyone affected, and communicating about current and future risks.

**Communicate Early and Often With Both Internal and External Stakeholders**

One of the fundamentals that crisis communicators should know is that they must make immediate contact with stakeholders and communicate about the crisis. Although the severity of the problem may not be known, stakeholders still need early and consistent communication about how the organization is moving forward. One of the things Rudy Giuliani did very well following 9/11 was to provide consistent reports to New York residents and the world about what was happening and how the cleanup was taking place. He did this even when there was no fresh news or when he had no information to provide. When holding a press conference on TV and asked to estimate the number of casualties, he acknowledged uncertainty by explaining, “The number of casualties is more than any of us can bear” or “We are going to sustain a tremendous loss to our bravest and best people.”

Many organizations fail in communicating because they do not make themselves available to stakeholders. Our advice to crisis communication students and practitioners is to consistently provide information
to stakeholders following a crisis. At times, when information is not available, just listening to stakeholders and fielding questions is much more valuable than stonewalling or being perceived as inaccessible.

Identifying the Cause of the Crisis

A critical factor in resolving any crisis is determining the cause. Once the cause has been identified, some of the uncertainty is cleared up, and corrective action can be taken. The primary problem here, however, is that identifying the cause of the crisis often takes a great deal of time, as we have mentioned earlier. Many different independent and governmental groups may work to identify a crisis’s cause, and they may often disagree with or question the veracity of other groups’ evidence. In addition, immediately after a crisis, accurate and appropriate information may not be available. During this time, the media and various other stakeholders often speculate about who is responsible and how the organization will recover from the crisis. Organizations can become defensive and closed to outside agencies as they try to spin the story positively or to the organization’s favor, which negatively affects their credibility.

Contacting Everyone Affected by the Crisis

At the onset of a crisis, organizations must be able to contact each individual or group affected. When communicating with stakeholders following a crisis, make sure to communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy. This does not mean that the spokesperson should not be professional. However, due to the dramatic nature of crisis and the impact that these events have on people’s lives, it is important to make sure that that people are communicated to with compassion for what they are going through, concern for their welfare, and empathy. James Lee Witt, (Witt & Morgan, 2002) former director of the Federal Emergency Management Association, explains that communication skills are critical after a crisis:

You can empathize with their pain and embarrassment at being helpless. You can make adjustments to the recovery process based on their need for dignity. You can make sure they have shelter and a hot meal. You can listen to their stories and acknowledge their concerns. You can hug them and let them cry on your shoulder. You can say to them as I do, we can’t bring back your memories, but we can help you build new ones. (p. 147)
As you can see, compassion, concern, and empathy are key communication strategies in moving beyond the crisis and generating opportunities for renewal and optimism.

Determining Current and Future Risks

In order to manage uncertainty, organizations must be aware of the current risks they face and potential future risks. Organizations that are able to consider potential risks in their environments are then able to prepare for and reduce uncertainty about these events, should they occur. Stakeholders will want to know whether they are at risk for similar crises in the future. In effective crisis communication cases, the organization is able to explain its corrective action to stakeholders so that these groups feel confident that the organization has made adequate corrections.

Within these four broad strategies for effective crisis communication, there are also some important communication approaches that need to be addressed. The first concentrates on the role of certainty in crisis communication. For some time, certain and clear communication has been the hallmark of effective crisis communication. Although clear and certain communication can be effective, we believe it can also get an organization into more trouble, can complicate the overall response for the organization, and can even be irresponsible.

Lesson 6
Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.

IS CERTAIN COMMUNICATION ALWAYS THE BEST APPROACH?

Much of the initial crisis communication research suggests that organizations should provide clear and consistent messages to stakeholders as quickly as possible after crises (Marconi, 1992; Schuetz, 1009; Seeger, 1986). Although this can be good advice, we now know that following some types of crises, this recommendation is not always practical or even advisable. Organizations that communicate too quickly with too much certainty often must later retract their public comments. Public statements recorded by the media and noted by stakeholders can subsequently be used against an organization. We believe that, in their initial public statements, organizations can interject some level of ambiguity or uncertainty that will enable them both to communicate
with their publics and to emphasize the level of uncertainty they are experiencing at the time—in effect, a more accurate reflection of the situation.

Peter Sandman (2004), a risk and crisis communication consultant, examined some successful and unsuccessful responses to the 2004 outbreak of avian flu in Asia, which was a devastating crisis for poultry farmers. During the crisis, various government and public health organizations were asked to comment on whether the avian flu could mutate into and become as infectious as ordinary human flu. Sandman explains that Bob Dietz, a World Health Organization spokesperson, communicated effectively by acknowledging the uncertainty of the crisis when he confirmed that a Vietnamese woman’s bird flu virus contained no human influenza genes. Dietz explained, “the results are encouraging, but unfortunately, they are still not the conclusive proof we need to fully discount the possibility of human-to-human transmission of the virus” (p. 46). Conversely, when asked if the bird flu had spread to Thailand, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra responded, “It’s not a big deal. If it’s bird flu, it’s bird flu. We can handle it . . . We have been working very hard . . . Please trust the government. It did not make an announcement in the very beginning because it did not want the public to panic” (p. 46). Sandman argues that the language in the second example is too certain and borders on overassuring the public that there will not be a problem. Organizations must be able to communicate what they know at the time. As a result, there will be times when they must say, “We do not know anything yet; however, this is what we are doing in terms of our crisis investigation.” At times, because accurate information is not always available, it is justifiable to say, “We do not know.”

BE CAREFUL OF OVERREASSURING YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

Making sure the organization does not overreassure audiences about a crisis’s risk or impact is consistent with discussions about communicating uncertainty and certainty about a crisis. A common misconception about crisis communication is that when a crisis hits, the public will panic and respond with mass hysteria. Research on crisis, at this point, is definitive that this is generally not the case (e.g., Quarantelli, 1988). In fact, the opposite is often true. Most of the examples in the literature
suggest that people behave extremely well during crisis. No doubt, people will take protective actions for themselves, but for the most part, they act in a rational manner. Barbara Reynolds (2002), CDC spokesperson, explains that “the condition most conducive to panic isn’t bad news; it is conflicting messages from those in authority” (p. 24). In this case, when the public believes that they cannot trust those in authority or that information is being hidden from them, the level of perceived threat is likely to increase substantially.

Lesson 8
Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.

Tell Your Stakeholders How to Protect Themselves

The public most often looks for statements that will give it something to ensure its safety. That being the case, organizations should not overreassure; rather, they should focus on self-efficacy—showing people how to protect themselves from the effects of the crisis.

Self-efficacy refers to statements made to the public that give people the ability to protect themselves from the effects of the crisis. Information communicated to stakeholders about how to protect themselves—self-efficacy—should be useful and practical and should suit their divergent needs. Barbara Reynolds (2002) suggests that crisis communicators should give minimum, middle, and maximum responses. For example, to protecting oneself from impure drinking water, she suggests, “(1) Use chlorine drops if safety is uncertain (2) boil water for 2 minutes or, (3) buy bottled water. We recommend boiling water” (p. 24). In this case, people are given information and alternatives about how to protect themselves.

We believe that self-efficacy messages should be valid, useful, and instructive in actually protecting stakeholders from potential risk. Instructions provided to the public by the Department of Homeland Security on using plastic and duct tape as protection during a terrorist attack were not very effective. However, in cases like the 1997 North Dakota floods, when the public was actively involved in sandbagging dikes to keep homes in the Red River valley safe, including the public in a crisis response was not only necessary but proved to be an

Lesson 9
The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.
effective and renewing approach for many citizens of Fargo and Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Moorhead and East Grand Forks, Minnesota (see Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002).

We suggest a counterintuitive approach to crisis communication: Rather than immediately responding to questions concerning a crisis with certainty in order to prevent the public from panicking, we advocate that due to the uncertainty of crisis, an organization’s communication should carry with it a level of ambiguity or uncertainty. In this case, we advocate against using absolute answers or overreassuring the public until adequate information is available. In addition, once an organization communicates statements of self-efficacy after a crisis, it is one step closer to using stakeholders as a resource. However, even statements of self-efficacy should include levels of ambiguity that represent the low, moderate, and high levels of concern of organizational stakeholders.

THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING

Knowing how to frame events is one of the most important strategies organizations can employ to move beyond a crisis. We have found that when organizations are able to think about the positive potential rather than the negative aspects of a crisis, they are better able to move beyond the event. Crises do offer opportunities for renewal and future growth. Many organizations frame crises in terms of alleviating responsibility and shifting the blame to other organizations. They also frame a crisis in terms of it being a terrible tragedy for the organization and its members. Organizations that are able to frame the crises in more optimistic terms are better able to move beyond them. Thinking about the potential positive aspects of a crisis focuses the organization on moving beyond the event and provides a positive direction toward which organizational members can work. Meyers and Holusha (1986) discuss seven potential positive results that can come from a crisis:

1. Heroes are born.
2. Change is accelerated.
3. Latent problems are faced.
4. People are changed.
5. New strategies evolve.


Meyers and Holusha (1986) suggest that leaders who manage crises effectively can be viewed as heroes. Clearly, Rudolph Giuliani, New York City mayor during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, was viewed as a hero due to his effective response to the crisis. Change can be accelerated following a crisis, since money is typically made available and people can clearly see the need for change. Latent problems are faced because these are typically the ones that created the crisis in the first place. People can be changed, as they now see the impact their faulty belief structures had on the organization and its effectiveness. New strategies evolve, since the organization must develop new approaches to doing business in order to move beyond the crisis. Early warning systems develop so that the organization will better be able to foresee and manage a potential future crisis. Last, new competitive advantages can appear after a crisis, as the entire nature of business may change. For instance, after 9/11, the airline industry became a much different industry. Where large airlines dominated the market before 9/11, small niche market airlines, such as Southwest Airlines, Jet Blue, and Song, are now having the greatest success. Only time will tell how long this competitive advantage will remain. Effective crisis communication, then, involves being positive and thinking about the potential positive aspects of crisis while dealing with the event. When thinking positively, organizations have the ability to frame the event in a similar way for stakeholders.

**SUMMARY**

This chapter examined effective crisis communication, based upon best practices in the field of crisis communication. We examined the role of listening in effective crisis communication, the need to understand the variety of audiences that an organization will face in a crisis and what these audiences want to hear, the role of certainty in crisis communication, and the power of positive thinking and its effect on moving beyond a crisis.

The next chapter illustrates how leaders can enact and employ the lessons from this chapter.
Lessons on Communicating Effectively in Crisis Situations

Lesson 1: Determine your goals for crisis communication.

Lesson 2: Before a crisis, develop true equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.

Lesson 3: Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.

Lesson 4: Organizations need to develop strong primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.

Lesson 5: Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.

Lesson 6: Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.

Lesson 7: Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available.

Lesson 8: Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.

Lesson 9: The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.

Lesson 10: Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.

REFERENCES


