

Crisis Preparedness Ins and Outs

Operational & Communications Response to Crises

By Jonathan Bernstein



About the Author

Jonathan Bernstein is president of Bernstein Crisis Management, Inc. He is regarded on a global level as one of the top crisis management consultants and educators.

Table of Contents

1. A Not-too-far From Reality Case Study
2. Who and Where Are Your Stakeholders?
3. How To Prepare for Crises – An Inside Job
 - Vulnerability Assessment
 - Crisis Planning: Operational and Communications
 - Evaluating the Need for Crisis Support Systems
 - Crisis-Related Training
 - Crisis Simulations
4. The Challenges of Crisis Communications
5. Evaluating Crisis Response
6. A Closing Message to CEOs

Every employee is a public relations representative and crisis manager for your organization, whether you want them to be or not.

In this White Paper, the author describes a new way to streamline crisis management and focus on the key aspects of crisis management within an organization. Too often, large complex plans are created that prove ineffective during a crisis. By using operational and communication plans coupled with a crisis support system, an organization can react and recover more quickly.

A Not-too-far From Reality Case Study

Chomp Foods manufactures dog food and treats in Pittsburgh using raw materials from Shanghai, where it maintains an office and warehouse. It has distribution centers with resident sales representatives in Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta and Newark.

An Associated Press breaking news story released at noon Eastern time reports that beef dog treats made by one of Chomp's competitors may be contaminated with salmonella. That competitor also sources raw materials in China. Here's the chain of events that then occur at Chomp Foods:

1. The director of marketing in Pittsburgh tries to reach somebody, anybody, in their Shanghai office, but it's 1 am the next day in China and he can't make contact. He sends email to all eight management-level people in that office asking them to call him ASAP.
2. Independently, the director of quality control in Pittsburgh sends an email out to distribution centers assuring them that she was looking into the news reports and would get back to them within a few days. The sales reps there start panicking.
3. The company's CEO is out playing golf with an important customer at about the same time. The customer's Blackberry sends him the AP story, and he turns to Chomp's CEO and asks, "So, are you sure your products are safe?" The CEO asks to read the story, then immediately sends a broadcast email to all offices, demanding a rapid response, but not assigning specific responsibility to anyone.
4. A Los Angeles Times reporter, knowing the company has offices locally, calls the distribution center and is connected with a sales representative. She asks, "So, is your company also affected by this product contamination?" The sales rep says, "I don't think so, but we won't know for a few more days."

In short, unmanaged communications and operational mayhem internally that will, shortly, start to create unmanaged mayhem with external stakeholders as well. And all completely avoidable if leaders understand the Ins and Outs of Crisis Preparedness – to include the importance of advance planning for both operational and communications response.

Before we go much farther, please consider some fundamental truths about crisis communications that have held up to the test of time and

experience, and which should be kept in mind when you are engaged in crisis planning or response.

A crisis is any situation that is threatening or could threaten to harm people or property, seriously interrupt business, damage reputation and/or negatively impact the bottom line.

The elements of this definition frequently interact, i.e.,

- how you manage a business interruption can affect your reputation;
- how you manage a threat to people or property can affect your reputation and your bottom line;
- how you manage a reputation threat can create, or minimize a business interruption; and so on.

Every employee is a public relations representative and crisis manager for your organization...

...and the corollary to that tenet is that employees are your most important stakeholders.

Most organizations learn, to their chagrin, that in times of crisis a lot of employees think they know exactly what to do, even in the absence of any training. That's how completely unauthorized spokespeople end up on camera, or why an inquiring reporter is thrown out of an office, physically.

The only responsibility some employees may have is something as simple as redirecting inquiries to a designated spokesperson, or pointing the way to an exit during an evacuation.

But if you don't tell each employee what they should and should not be doing, they wing it, often with disastrous results. In the absence of communication, bad guesses, rumor and innuendo fill the gap.

Failure to empower employees with the procedures, methods and messages to use in a crisis ensures that they will do whatever each of them think is best.

The most effective crisis response is carefully coordinated crisis response. That supposes that crisis-related plans and procedures exist, and that employees have been trained how to use them.

If you choose not to make it easy for each employee to do their job in support of crisis response, you are choosing to incur far more damage and cost than you would if you engaged in proactive preparedness.

Who and Where Are Your Stakeholders?

For most organizations, Internal Stakeholders typically consist of:

Even with well-crafted plans in place, effective crisis response has its challenges, challenges that burn themselves into leaders' consciousness.

Failure to empower employees with the procedures, methods and messages to use in a crisis assures that they will do whatever each of them think is best.



- Employees
- Major contractors/consultants/vendors

While External Stakeholders may include:

- Shareholders
- Customers/clients
- Referral sources
- Regulators
- Media that reaches all of the above—both traditional and social media.

That sounds fairly simple, until you look at the fact that none of these stakeholder groups can be considered a single audience for communications purposes. Each individual, each organizational division, each company, subsidiary or affiliated organization, has its own informational needs.

During a crisis, communication is already challenged by the “noise” of stress and rumor, yet you have to be able to get critical operational information and guidance to all stakeholders according to their needs.


But wait, there’s more. Because when we say “according to their needs,” we mean not just need for information, but need to receive the information via channels with which they are comfortable.

Employee Jones might be best reached by phone, but Employee Smith by text. Shareholder Wilson prefers important information to come by email, while one of her peers likes to be briefed in person when at all possible.

Finally, consider what happens when you have a widely distributed organization, with operations in multiple locations, each location having some unique differences from the others in terms of resident crisis response capabilities.

- How will they know when they are supposed to “be in charge” of a situation and when that direction has to come from a corporate crisis management team?
- How will they know what each internal stakeholder is doing to mitigate the crisis?
- How can crisis team leaders operating in a 24/7, multi-location, multi-time zone, even multi-national situation, both communicate to and receive communications from team members in real time?
- Are there any major contractors or consultants who need to be added to the crisis response effort, and how can that be done quickly and efficiently?

That is merely a microcosmic window into the complex communications decisions and interactions that need to take place during a significant crisis.



During a crisis, communication is already challenged by the “noise” of stress and rumor, yet you have to be able to get critical operational information and guidance to all stakeholders according to their needs.

How To Prepare for Crises – An Inside Job

There are five steps to effective crisis preparation:

1. Vulnerability Assessment

A Vulnerability Audit is a multi-disciplinary risk assessment to determine current and potential areas of operational and communications weakness and strength, and to identify potential solutions, because weaknesses may result in emergencies or crises of varying magnitudes if not corrected. Ideally, every functional area of an organization is examined to identify anything that could lead to or exacerbate a crisis.

There are professional iterations of this process offered by crisis management professionals, but the simplest starting point can be as easy as holding regular “what if” brainstorming sessions at which managers are invited to suggest worst-case scenarios that could threaten the organization.

Then the management team examines, as thoroughly as possible, how prepared the organization is to respond to such a situation and, if under-prepared, what it has to do to get up to speed.

2. Crisis Planning – Operational and Communications

When assessed during the vulnerability process, one prominent west coast university was found to have no less than six different crisis-related plans, each of them created by different employees without any coordination between the originating departments. The documents included:


- Natural disaster response plan
- Facilities emergency plan
- Fire response plan
- Crisis communications plan
- Emergency operations plan
- Web emergency plan

As a result of this haphazard approach to planning, there were gaping holes in crisis preparedness as well as some significant self-inflicted wounds. For example, during a natural disaster such as an earthquake, different plans would have had the same senior-level staff member in two different parts of the campus at the same time.

In fact, only two types of planning needs to be done:

- Operational – what do we do, who does it, when is it done, etc.
- Communications – what do we say, who says it, how do we get the messages out, etc.

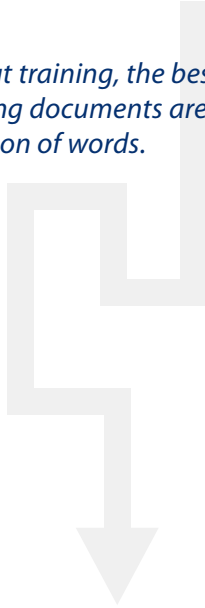
These two are brought together effectively by sharing information internally and then communicating the results outside.



...only two types of planning needs to be done: operational and communications.

...a Crisis Support System is the physical or organizational infrastructure necessary to ensure that both operational and communications plans can be carried out quickly and efficiently.

Without training, the best crisis planning documents are just a collection of words.



3. Evaluating the Need for Crisis Support Systems

Evaluating the need for crisis support systems is probably the most under-employed elements of effective crisis preparedness.

What do we mean by a “Crisis Support System”? For any given organization, a Crisis Support System is the physical or organizational infrastructure necessary to ensure that both operational and communications plans can be carried out quickly and efficiently. It is the glue that binds both types of planning together.

Examples of crisis support systems include:

- Creating special teams for crisis-specific purposes, even when the teams consist of people who might not usually work together.
- Consolidating all critical contact lists into a single organized database for ease-of-use.
- Investing in services and/or software that support rapid notification of pre-defined groups of important contacts, internal and external.
- Using Internet-centered technology to allow crisis team members in multiple locations to confer and share data online in a single virtual location (as opposed to endless strings of emails, notifications and conference calls).

4. Crisis-Related Training

Without training, the best crisis planning documents are just a collection of words. There are a number of training categories:

Training to the plans

Sitting down with operational and/or communications team members in-person, virtually, or some combination of both. The purpose – going over the plans, page by page, and “talking through” how well they’d work in practice. This is the first “all hands” look at the plans, and invariably elicits suggestions for improvements.

Media/presentation training

Training to communicate with the media or other audiences (e.g., town hall meetings, investor meetings) during times of crisis is significantly different, and harder, than the type of training many spokespersons receive in order to give “soft interviews” to consumer, business or trade press.

Such training helps you

- develop and refine key messages
- see “what really works” under the stress of simulated interviews (and good media trainers make you forget it’s simulated)
- optimize your chances of achieving balanced coverage
- identify who should – and who shouldn’t – be spokespersons for your organization.

It's easy to get bogged down in "doing it perfectly" versus getting your process established and then running through it repeatedly, getting better each time.

...factor in multiple locations and multiple time zones and you can understand why relying on telephones and email alone for 21st Century communications is not optimal.



The Challenges of Crisis Communications

Even with well-crafted plans in place, effective crisis response has its challenges, challenges that burn themselves into leaders' consciousness during the crisis simulation phase. The most common challenges include:

Operational vs. Communication Issues Discrimination

Crisis response, like military battles, has its equivalent of the "fog of war." With many people doing so many things concurrently, knowing which activity belongs to a given individual or group of individuals mandates the ability to quickly sort out fact from fiction, determine short-term obstacles, and "direct traffic."

In order to know what to say, communications team members need to know the results of operational activities. Operations team members may need to know what feedback is coming into the communications team in order to adapt their own crisis response.

Now, factor in multiple locations and multiple time zones and you can understand why relying on telephones and email alone for 21st century communications is not optimal. However, if appropriate crisis support systems have been put in place, then leaders of crisis teams should have the ability to make rapid and informed decisions.

Having and Using Backup Systems

Phones go down. Internet connections go down. Power goes out. We take the availability of our technology so much for granted that when we lose it due to some calamity (e.g., Hurricane Katrina), we suddenly feel like we're on a desert island with no access to food or water. In fact, utilities and technology failures are a frequent cause of crises themselves.

That said, there are ways to ensure that when any operational or communications system goes down or is reduced in efficacy, there is at least adequate backup. Satellite phone and broadband technology. 3G cards. ADSL Internet connections. Electrical generators.

Multi-Location Challenges

It often seems that every office of any single organization develops its own "personality," ranging from feeling highly connected and related to the "home office" to having an "us versus them" mentality.

Some locations may have a full range of staffing positions filled, others may be very thinly staffed, and all have a wide array of operational responsibilities which they may perceive to be more important than a "crisis du jour" that primarily affects some other location.

The leading causes of poor crisis response are arrogance and denial.



The physical and emotional differences between different organizational locations are some of the challenges which should be factored into all aspects of crisis planning and training. One of the functions of training should be to create a sense of unity with regard to crisis response, regardless of the relationship between locations when it's business-as-usual.

Using common-access technology can foster that sense of unity, and training crisis responders together, away from their bases of operation, can help achieve the same result. It also ensures that there is a common message and situational understanding which can be tailored for local conditions.

Arrogance and Denial

The leading causes of poor crisis response are arrogance and denial. Both lead to crisis team leaders and/or members of their teams concluding that:

- It won't happen to us.
- It may happen to us, but we'll be able to wing it.
- I think I see a warning sign that there might be a crisis brewing, but I don't need to bother the "brass" back at company HQ.
- I think I can get away with _____ just this once.

There is no solution for arrogance and denial other than alert CEO's who are completely committed to overcoming all of these challenges.

Evaluating Crisis Response

Crisis Management consultant G. Mark Towhey says that "communication has been successful when the desired response has been achieved."

Just so, operational activities have been successful when the desired result has been achieved.

And to know how successful you've been in either regard during a crisis (or exercise), methods of measurement – subjective and objective – must be established in advance.

Such measurement methods are the topic of many business articles and scholarly papers, so we will not belabor them here. Suffice it to say that, as with much of 21st Century crisis response, technology can play a vital role in collecting, sorting, evaluating and archiving data.

Without such evaluation, you may not do enough to fully put a crisis behind you or waste considerable resources pouring water on flames that have long since gone out.

A Closing Message to CEOs

This paper provides you with many factors to consider and, when you do, consider that you don't have to be an expert in this arena any more than you're expert in any of the areas for which you employ skilled executives or consultants.

You do have to believe and be a champion for the cause of true Crisis Preparedness, because without a champion at the CEO level, any attempts at preparedness sputter to a halt long before they have achieved real-life functionality.

This white paper is brought to you by



Emergency Notification • Incident Management

MissionMode's web-based emergency notification and incident management solutions simplify your response to any type of incident, from routine operational issues to major disasters. Industry-leading organizations around the world trust MissionMode to reduce the time and cost of returning to normal business operations.

Emergency Notification

The Notification Center™ eliminates the guesswork of what message to send, who to contact and how. The right message is sent to the right people through the right devices. The system is smart enough to adapt to constantly changing situations, yet it's so easy to use that alerts can be sent in as little as ten seconds. A real-time dashboard confirms delivery of each message and the responses, such as "on-site in 30 minutes."

Incident Management

After alerts are sent, our Situation Center™ provides the tools to remedy the incident. This simple-to-use virtual command center brings together your plans, people, communications and resources. No matter where they're located, your staff can contribute vital information, monitor tasks, track people's status, and access needed files. From the start, teams are equipped with the resources they need for that type of incident, ensuring a consistent response. The Situation Center gives you an accurate common operating picture for making informed decisions, and ensures that no detail is overlooked.

Online tools that are easy to implement, cost-effective, and require minimal training.

Contact us to learn more or schedule a demonstration.

info@missionmode.com

www.missionmode.com

North America

Toll-free: 877.833.7763

Phone: +1 312.445.8811

International

Phone: +44 1494 837198

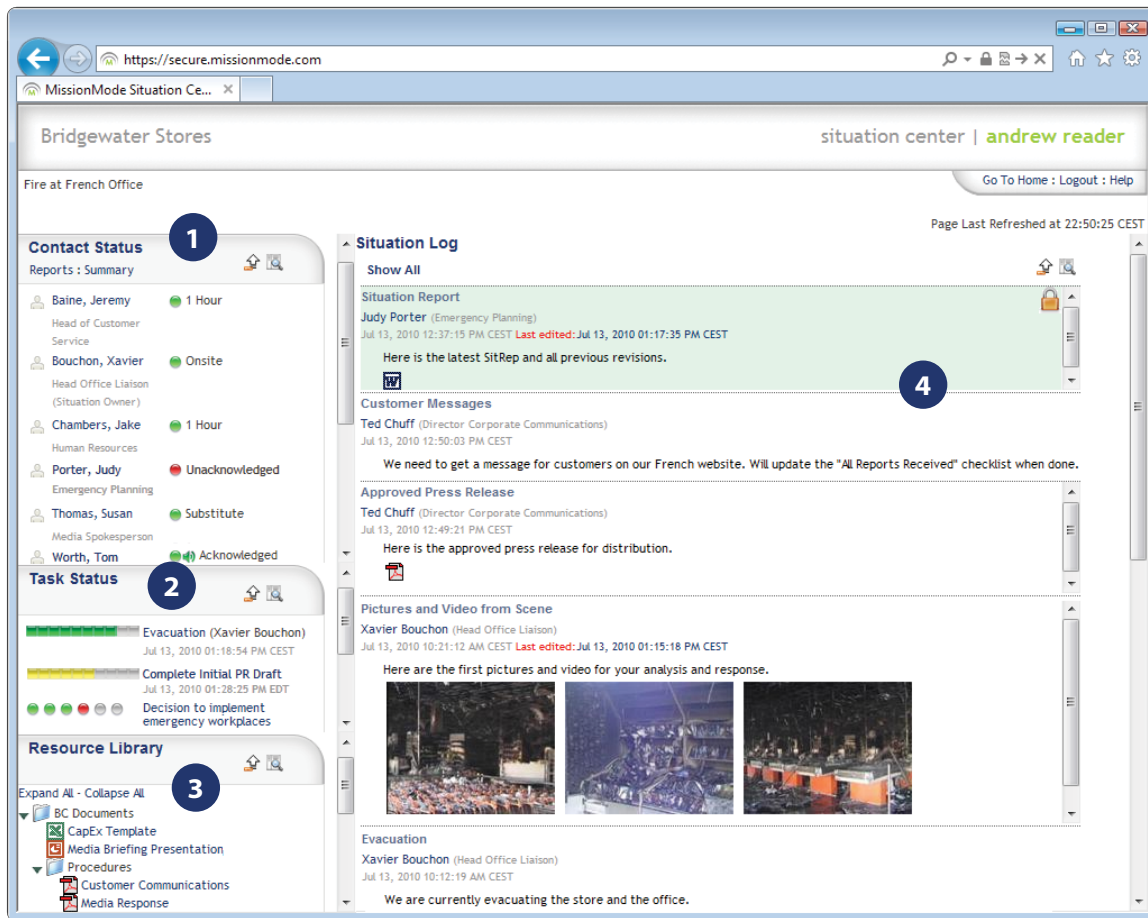
"With MissionMode, we feel like we are their only customer."

Director of Corporate Crisis Management at a major global logistics company



The MissionMode Situation Center

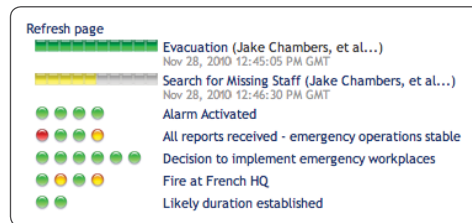
A secure hub for communications, collaboration and control—anytime, anywhere



4. Users share information and come to informed decisions



1. Team status at a glance



2. Monitor and assign tasks



3. Access plans, procedures and any type of file

"MissionMode radically reduces the time it takes to get an overview of an incident and take appropriate action to minimise its impact."

Bob Graham,
Group Business Risk Manager, TBI