The Six Stages of a Crisis

Stage One: The Warning Phase

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Executive Summary

Best practices dictate that incident notification messages issued during the first phase of a crisis – the Warning Phase, be constructed and consistent with the commitment to take appropriate action to increase readiness. Communication undertaken during the Warning Phase of an emergency situation is designed to increase the ability of emergency personnel to respond effectively to an incident when it occurs. Responsiveness should include procedures to notify personnel assigned to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), the response team, and emergency management support functions. The Warning Phase notifications may be last instructions, reminders, and notices that are communicated before the chaos and confusion of a disaster or emergency springs forth. Be mindful of the wording in your notification messages. Even subtle differences may result in either motivating your audience to act in a preferred manner or might unintentionally frighten them and have negative or undesired ramification.

The Facts in Brief

A crisis is an unexpected event that disrupts normal operational processes and has the potential to create significant safety issues and/or property damage. Depending on the nature and severity of a crisis the safety and well-being of people may be endangered and may present complex threats and risks. The communication goals, information required, constraints, challenges, methods, channels, audiences, and messages will vary throughout the life cycle of a crisis. Every stage of the crisis dictates the audience’s requirements, including the need for information, and dictates the response of the organization providing the warning.

There are six identified phases within every crisis: (1) Warning; (2) Risk Assessment; (3) Response; (4) Management; (5) Resolution; and (6) Recovery. While the boundaries between
these stages are often blurred and some of these stages actually overlap, experience has taught us that thinking about our communication during these stages is a helpful method to enhance our communication preparedness and ultimately communication success. This is the first of six topic briefings that will explore each phase of a crisis, identify specific areas of concern, discuss the goals, challenges and priorities for each phase and provide manageable solutions.

The first possible stage of a crisis is the **Warning Phase**. Obviously different crises can occur under conditions in which there is a very distinct warning phase or no warning period whatsoever. One example of dissimilar warning periods is the difference between a bomb threat (which provides a distinct warning phase) whereas an explosion as a result of a bomb provides little to no warning period. However, preparedness and planning for effectively communicating when there is a warning about a potential incident is essential for overall communication success. Certain types of emergency incidents have very distinct warning phases. For example, the warning phase might be accurately represented by a “watch” issued by the National Weather Service for a storm or other weather event. Regardless of the length of the warning phase, effective communication and incident notification is essential to protect the health and safety of people during major crises. The warning phase also requires a response that includes notifying specific constituents, including: key personnel, law enforcement, and risk management constituents.

Communication during a warning stage is often precautionary and is intended to heighten awareness. Messages during the warning phase need to be kept simple and direct. The alert messages need to be consistent and draw on prior training and expectations. There may be limited and specific notifications sent to those who are potentially at risk or can be of assistance in assessing the danger or mitigating the threats identified by the warning. Instructions and notices that either prevent the occurrence of an emergency or mitigate the risk in ways that minimize the adverse impact of an emergency are examples of typical warning phase communication.

This is also the time to start alerting or activating specific actions during emergency situations. Notification could also include informing personnel of the circumstances under which emergency procedures would be activated or become effective and/or under what conditions they would be terminated. Warning phase notifications should include making status reports, taking stock of preparedness, and alerting personnel of their subsequent notification, recall rosters, and procedures if an incident occurs. The goal is to provide these personnel with the information needed to implement emergency response should such action become necessary. This should include procedures to implement notification of personnel assigned to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), the response team and emergency management support functions. The warning phase notices may be the last instructions, reminders, and notices that you communicate before the chaos and confusion of a disaster or emergency springs forth. Communication during the warning phase includes communication to the EOC, security dispatch, and facilities work-order control center.

Warning communication should support preparing organizational resources, response field personnel, and readiness to sustain contact during emergencies. Communication in the warning phase may also include providing instructions and reminders for the reporting of damage assessment information to the EOC is also helpful to disseminate during a warning phase. In addition, it is not premature to alert all elements associated with your response and recovery to verify their readiness to respond. Mitigation alert efforts are your last opportunity to make all things ready to prevent, limit the impact of, and quickly respond to an emergency.Warnings should be consistent with your preparedness instruction efforts. If you have time and opportunity
during a warning phase, you should distribute brief and urgent preparedness alerts. These may include informing people about how to take the necessary precautions to protect themselves and their property if the emergency were to occur. There are a number of last minute instructions that could be issued during a warning phase, including actions to take to avoid harm or to prevent an incident from occurring, along with how to be prepared to bounce back after an emergency.

A warning notification will also affect both you and your audience. Whether it is an approaching storm or a bomb threat: communicating a warning will itself result in a potential rise in concern and anxiety, physiological changes, cognitive effects, and thinking processes. Increased stress can impact the ability to focus, be attentive, listen, think, comprehend, and comply with instructions. Messages during the warning phase need to be kept simple and direct. In addition, the alert messages need to be consistent and draw on prior training and expectations.

Alert messages during the warning phase should focus on non-dramatized, objective descriptions of the threat risks, provide specific behavioral requests, and incorporate a method to confirm compliance and status. Stick with the known facts and be diligent in evaluating information before you release it. Outbound communication during this stage is often precautionary but should accomplish key tasks to alert and advise recipients. Whether intended or unintended, the wording in your notification messages will either motivate your audience to act competently and appropriately or might frighten them and create undue stress. In addition, disclosures and transparency will build credibility and trust with audiences. Awareness and vigilance can be raised with alerts during the warning phase. Do not ignore the important communication needs and opportunities that exist during periods where you have a warning of a potential critical incident.

**Key Recommendations**

1. **Plan for success.** Having a sufficient preinstalled notification protocols and communication plans in place directly impacts the appropriateness and overall success of the response to the needs of the warning phase.
2. **Prepare messages in advance.** Create messages for different warning scenarios which can be used promptly and effectively. Your communication should be consistent with your commitment to take appropriate action to increase readiness as a potential emergency situation looms. Your communication should also build upon advance training and preparedness steps.
3. **Monitor the chatter.** Successful communication relies on “listening” as much as “talking.” Focus on tools and processes that increase or confirm the readiness for success and those that can mitigate crisis impact position people and resources in order to maximize safety, operational continuity and successful management.
4. **Keep messages simple.** Consider the readability of messages and amount of processing required to understand them. Messages during the warning phase need to be simple and direct. Things get easily and quickly confused with we start thinking about dangerous threats.
5. **Words matter.** Choose your words carefully. The wording in your notification messages will either motivate your audience to act competently and appropriately or frighten them and create undue stress, confusion and dysfunction.
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Dr. Chandler’s research spans the range of crisis communication, leadership, teamwork, decision making, psychometric variables during crises and emergency communication including specific areas of crisis and incident notification, warning messages, cognitive processing & message comprehension. He also investigates organizational communication, communication and conflict; risk communication, multicultural and intercultural communication issues and business ethics. He is the creator of several widely used planning models for crisis and emergency communication preparedness, including: (1) Communication Planning for the Six Stages of Crisis, (2) the 3-3-30© principle for incident notification, and (3) Message Mapping: The Chandler Model.

Dr. Chandler is an internationally recognized social scientific researcher with more than 150 academic and professional papers, including widely circulated “white papers” on emergency and crisis communication. He has authored more than 75 academic and professional publications, and is the author or co-author of eight books including: Emergency Notification (2010); Surviving the Pandemic: A Communication Management Guide for Business (2009); Media Relations (2008); Disaster Recovery and the News Media (2007); Managing the Risks for Corporate Integrity: How to Survive and Ethical Misconduct Disaster (2006); Pandemic: Business Continuity Planning Priorities for the Coming Outbreak (2005); and Crisis and Emergency Communication (2006).


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