

Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process

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The description of “best practices” is widely used to improve organizational and professional practice. This analysis describes best practices in crisis communication as a form of grounded theoretical approach for improving the effectiveness of crisis communication specifically within the context of large publicly-managed crises. The results of a panel of crisis communication experts are reviewed. Ten best practices for effective crisis communication, which were synthesized from this process, are presented and described.

Keywords: Crisis Communication; Disasters; Risk; Best Practices

The concept of best practices is a popular approach to improving organizational and professional practice in a wide array of venues, including many communication contexts. This includes such diverse areas as corporate communication, health communication, public relations, employee communication, stakeholder communication, and the communication of change, among others (Public Relations Society of America [PRSA], 1997).

The purpose of this analysis is to describe best practices in crisis communication. My goal is to characterize the best practices approach as a form of grounded theory for process improvement and to specifically describe the role of best practices in crisis communication. The results of a best practices panel of crisis communication experts are also presented. These are then synthesized into a set of ten general best practices for effective crisis communication.¹

Best Practices

The identification of best practices is often associated with benchmarking and larger process improvement initiatives and programs of strategic organizational change

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(Kyro, 2004). Process improvement generally involves a systematic overview, analysis, and assessment of organizational processes in an effort to improve quality and efficiency. Benchmarking is a process of identifying industry standards through a focus on industry leaders and recognized experts in a given field. Benchmarking reviews often proceed with systemic descriptions and measurement of high-quality and efficient operations (Ahmed & Rafiq, 1998). The processes, practices, and systems identified among industry leaders are then described as “best practices” and may provide models for other organizations with similar functions, contingencies, and missions. In addition, panels of experts in a given field may be asked to generate normative standards and principles characteristic of effectiveness and efficiency. Best practices, then, usually take the form of a general set of standards, guidelines, norms, reference points, or benchmarks that inform practice and are designed to improve performance.

Best practices are generally practice-driven but may also be grounded in systemic research and a grounded theoretical approach. Grounded theory is particularly useful in developing generalized standards and principles as an area of organizational and professional practice matures and develops. Grounded theory proceeds from an inductive standpoint and seeks to understand a phenomenon, in part, by describing patterns and conceptual categories within a data set (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These categories can then be explored in other contexts to determine their generalizability. Grounded theory has been used widely in communication inquiry (Gilchrist & Browning, 1981; Nicotera, 1993). It is also important to recognize, however, that professional and organizational contexts are diverse, dynamic, and complex. What works in one industry may have very limited applicability to another. Thus, widespread adaptation of best practices should be undertaken cautiously with a firm understanding of contextual factors and situational variables.

These approaches to the improvement of professional and organizational processes and practices may also be framed within the larger context of organizational learning. Best practices are useful for packaging learned principles in a way that facilitates their communication both within and between organizations and, ultimately, their adoption (Cohen & Sproull, 1996). Thus, best practices can also be understood as larger lessons for organizational and professional learning for a particular venue of practice.

Best Practices and Crisis Communication

One of the challenges in developing a best-practices approach is to identify a sufficiently large sample of cases from which generalized rules and principles can be synthesized. Given the fact that crises and disasters are, by definition, relatively rare events, the sample problem is particularly salient in developing best practices in crisis communication. Moreover, there is significant variance in crisis types, and a number of investigators have noted that type, organizational history, and the specific dynamics of the crisis are critical factors in determining strategy and approach (Coombs, 1999; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). It is possible, however, to generalize

from other forms of communication and to extrapolate from the now considerable body of largely case-based research in crisis communication.

One additional complexity in developing a best-practices approach to crisis communication concerns goals. Crisis communication usually has a variety of goals, some of which may conflict. One universal goal is to reduce and contain harm. Those organizations associated with a crisis or disaster may seek to limit damage to their reputation, avoid responsibility, and even shift blame. Governmental agencies may prioritize reestablishing public order while the public may prioritize being informed, protected, and even reimbursed. During a crisis, the media seeks immediate information for wide distribution while public health is likely to be concerned with clarifying the facts and protecting patient privacy.

Finally, crises and risk are also inherently dynamic and unpredictable. Cookie-cutter approaches to crisis communication are likely to be poorly matched to the exigencies of the specific situation. Many crisis plans, for example, are developed as general outlines rather than step-by-step guides. The former are more adaptable to a variety of situations while the latter approach may be too constraining and misleading (Coombs, 1999).

Parameters of Crisis Communication

In order to articulate a set of principles for best practices, it is first necessary to have some consensus regarding the target area. In this case, some exploration of the terms “crisis communication” and “risk communication” is required. While a detailed discussion of similarities and differences is beyond the scope of this analysis, it is worth acknowledging that these terms have different traditions and nomenclatures. Risk communication has typically been associated with health communication and efforts to warn the public about the risks associated with particular behaviors. Drawing on the principles of persuasion, risk communication has largely been conceptualized as a problem of getting the public and/or specific target audiences to attend to identifiable risks, such as smoking, unsafe sex, or drinking and driving, and adjusting their behavior accordingly (see Witte, 1995). Crisis communication, in contrast, is more typically associated with public relations and the need for organizations to repair damaged images after a crisis or disaster (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999). In addition, warning and risk communication has also been part of the larger emergency management tradition (Mileti & Sorensen, 1990).

Recent efforts have been directed toward merging these traditions into a more comprehensive approach. Led primarily by the work of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the merged approach is called “crisis and emergency risk communication” (Reynolds, Galdo & Sokler, 2002). This merged approach is, in part, a larger acknowledgment of the developmental features of risks and crisis, and recognition that effective communication must be an integrated and ongoing process.

Crises also take many forms. Several crisis taxonomies have been developed in the research literature. These typically include so-called “natural disasters” (tsunamis, earthquakes, and wild fires), industrial accidents (spills, explosions, and product

defects), and intentional events (workplace violence, product tampering, and terrorist attacks) as well as a variety of other kinds of harm-inducing occurrences (Seeger et al., 2003). Distinguishing between various crises and disasters is important because the type of event influences the requirements for effective communication. Foodborne illness, for example, often places a premium on rapid announcements and recalls. Transportation accidents usually create complex questions about blame and responsibility, and the need for explanations and accounts that will inform revisions to policies and procedures.

The best crisis communication practices described below were generated from the research literature, with the focus primarily on widespread public crisis or disaster. These kinds of events are typically broad-based and managed by a public agency, such as the Centers for Disease Control, Departments of Public Health, the United States Department of Agriculture, or the Federal Emergency Management Administration. This includes events such as the anthrax episode of 2000, the Florida hurricane season of 2004, or the outbreak of *E. coli* poisoning from contaminated school lunch strawberries in 1997. While questions of blame and responsibility are never absent from a crisis, they tend to be secondary in these cases, displaced by issues of accurate, timely, and useful information and the need to help victims and restore order. A list of best practices for organizationally-based events, where questions of blame and responsibility are central issues, might be very different to the list offered here.

Method

To develop our list of best practices for crisis communication, we draw primarily on the work of Vincent Covello, Peter Sandman, and Matthew Seeger; the work of Barbara Reynolds at the Centers for Disease Control; and research conducted by the National Center for Food Protection and Defense² and by the North Dakota State University Risk and Crisis Communication Project. The resulting mixture of principles is based on anecdotal observations, experience in crisis response, and extended case study analysis. Some empirical investigations of crisis and risk communication are also represented in this body of work (see Figure 1).

An initial effort was made to synthesize and integrate these principles based on commonalities, intersections, and overlapping concepts. An expert crisis communication panel at the National Center for Food Safety and Defense then participated in an iterative review and critique of these best practices. Adjustments and refinements were made. These resulted in the final version of ten best practices presented here.

Independent Observations

The best practices identified through a review of the literature are characterized by a high degree of consensus and some important variance. Many of the differences are largely a matter of focus. For example, two of the four independent assessments included planning as a method of risk reduction and crisis avoidance. Almost all

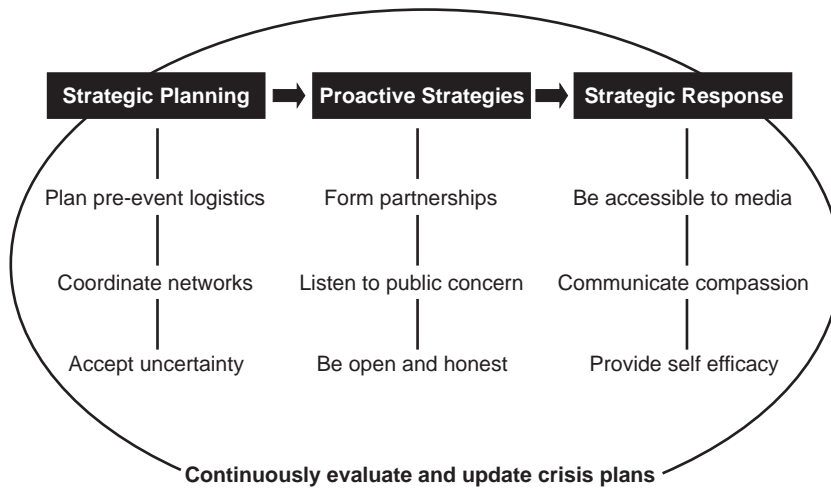


Figure 1. Best practices in risk and crisis communication (National Center for Food Protection and Defense, <http://www.fpd.umn.edu>).

crisis communication literature would advise that planning is a critical best practices approach. Similarly, coordination with community partners and first responders was also universally recommended. Again, almost all crisis communication experts would emphasize coordination as a best practice. In addition, some of the best practices were offered as generalized standards or values to which crisis communicators should adhere. Others described specific processes of crisis communication that would enhance effectiveness. Ten general best practices which fit these four independent judgments are described below.

Ten Best Practices of Crisis Communication

1. Process Approaches and Policy Development

The expert panel involved in articulating these best practices frequently returned to the themes of process approaches and the role of communicators in policy development. These are overarching concepts and general orientations to the role of communication in crisis management that inform all of the subsequent practices described.

With regard to issues of policy development, the expert panel emphasized that communication should not merely be involved in communicating decisions about risk and crisis after they have been made. Rather, risk and crisis communication is most effective when it is part of the decision process itself. This approach is consistent with larger debate in the public relations literature. Specifically, a number of authors have suggested that public relations and issue management should be viewed as managerial and decision processes as opposed to simply staff implementation functions (Dozier & Broom, 1995; White & Dozier, 1992). Communication strategies should be fully integrated into the decision-making process. By so doing,

communication issues are brought to bear more immediately and more fully in the process of planning for and responding to crisis. If communication issues are only considered after the fact, the effectiveness of crisis communication is typically reduced. Often, the meaning of the crisis has already been framed by others, and communication activities are forced into a catch-up role. In such circumstances, crisis communication is more likely to be characterized as spin designed to sell a decision after the fact. Finally, higher-quality decisions are made when the concerns and needs of key audiences are taken into account as part of the decision-making process. The communication function is well positioned to facilitate this process.

Similarly, crisis and risk communication is most effective when it is part of an ongoing and integrated process. The CDC, for example, outlines five stages of a crisis and details a specific set of communication activities associated with each. These include pre-crisis communication activities, such as communication planning and educating the public about preparation. During the post-crisis resolution phase, communication activities include codifying and communicating lessons learned and rebuilding any relationships damaged by the crisis. When crisis communication follows a process model, it is more comprehensive and systematic in addressing the entire range of strategies from pre- to post-event.

2. Pre-Event Planning

A second best practice of crisis communication is pre-event planning. Planning has a variety of benefits. These include identifying risk areas and corresponding risk reduction, pre-setting initial crisis responses so that decision making during a crisis is more efficient, and identifying necessary response resources. Significant case-based evidence exists, for example, that it is essential to conduct risk analysis and assessment for the management of risk and the prevention of crisis. All organizations should identify the potential hazards they face. For example, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) plans are often described as essential for preventing and managing foodborne illness outbreaks. Having a plan in place serves as a constant reminder of potential problems and provides checkpoints for employees to follow in hope of preventing crises. Such planning, therefore, can enhance overall mindfulness regarding risks. It is also important to clarify the relationship between a crisis communication plan and a larger, more inclusive crisis response or emergency management plan. While, often, the two are integrated into one document, they are sometimes separate and associated with different units or departments. What is most important, however, is that the emergency management planning takes communication processes into account.

A number of crisis communication planning templates are available, including the FEMA Community Planning template, the CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication outline, and Coombs' (1999) Crisis Communication Planning template. These models generally outline what should be included in a plan and how the planning process should progress. The CDC, for example, recommends that crisis communication include signed endorsements from management, designated

responsibilities for team members, internal verification and release procedures, agreements on release authority, media contact lists, procedures to coordinate with other agencies and groups, designated spokespersons, emergency contact information for team members and for other agencies, agreements for joint information centers, procedures to secure needed resources, and identified channels for information distribution (Reynolds et al., 2002). In general, planning is described as an ongoing process rather than as a specific, tangible outcome. There is also some evidence that using realistic assumptions in planning is important (Tierney, Lindell, & Perry, 2001) and that involving a wide set of stakeholders, including the community, results in a more effective plan (Lasker, 1997).

Last, crisis communication plans should include structures that allow for regular updating and revision. This should include an opportunity to accommodate new understandings about risk, new partners, and new response contingencies. For this reason, information-sharing networks are effective and efficient ways of obtaining new insights that can then be incorporated into the planning process.

3. Partnerships with the Public

Accepting the public as a legitimate and equal partner emerged from the literature as a best practice in crisis communication. The public has the right to know what risks it faces, and ongoing efforts should be made to inform and educate the public using science-based risk assessments. At the same time, public concerns about risk should be accepted as legitimate. During a crisis, the public should be told what is happening, and organizations managing crises have a responsibility to share this information. This acknowledgment has specific implications for the timely and accurate communication of information to the public and for the solicitation of concerns and questions from the public. Ideally, the public can serve as a resource, rather than a burden, in risk and crisis management. Thus, crisis communication best practices would emphasize a dialogic approach.

One of the impediments to a dialogic approach to crisis communication is the myth that the public will panic if it has accurate information about a crisis. This myth is not supported by the available research, and, in fact, there is some reason to believe that withholding information from the public decreases the probability that it will respond appropriately (Tierney, 2003).

4. Listen to the Public's Concerns and Understand the Audience

In order to achieve a standpoint of dialogue, an organization managing risks or experiencing a crisis must listen to the concerns of the public, take these concerns into account, and respond accordingly. In fact, understanding audiences is associated with effective communication in any context. A number of investigations have indicated that establishing positive relationships and a reservoir of goodwill before an event is critical to the successful management of a crisis (Coombs, 1999; Ulmer, 2001). Ongoing interaction with the public is necessary to achieve this credibility. In

addition, the credibility an organization develops prior to a crisis is particularly valuable during a crisis. Such credibility translates into believability and trust between the public and those seeking to manage the event. Conversely, organizations that fail to develop credible, trusting relationships prior to a crisis will have an exceptionally difficult time doing so after a crisis occurs. In fact, lack of credibility may significantly enhance the probability of harm.

Whether accurate or not, the public's perception is its reality. If the public believes a risk exists, it can be expected to act according to that belief. If the public believes that a crisis is severe, it is also important to acknowledge this belief and respond accordingly. On occasion, however, the public may respond with outrage to an issue that does not constitute a major risk or an impending crisis. For example, many consumers refused to eat beef after learning that a single Canadian cow was infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy ("mad cow disease") even though the risk of contracting the human form of mad cow disease, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, was so low as to be virtually non-existent. Monitoring public opinion about risk prior to a crisis and about perceived severity after a crisis is essential to treating the public as a partner. This information provides the basis for adapting messages to the public's dynamic needs and for addressing public concerns.

5. Honesty, Candor, and Openness

A significant body of crisis communication research emphasizes honesty as a best practice. As noted earlier, honesty is necessary to build credibility and trust before and during a crisis. Openness about risks may promote an environment of risk-sharing, where the public and agencies mutually accept responsibility for managing a risk. Moreover, if information about a crisis is not shared openly by the organization engaged in the crisis, the public will obtain information from other sources. In so doing, the organization loses the ability to manage the crisis message. Effective crisis communicators are honest, candid, and open in their public communication. Such honesty, in the long run, fosters credibility with both the media and the public. Moreover, a response that is less than honest may, ultimately, create the perception of wrong doing.

In this context, honesty, candor, and openness may be conceptualized on a continuum. Honesty, in its most fundamental sense, is not lying. Candor refers to communicating the entire truth as it is known, even when the truth may reflect negatively on the agency or organization. A candid assessment might also include worse-case scenarios and fear about how bad the crisis might become. Openness in crisis communication refers to a kind of accessibility and immediacy that goes beyond even a candid response. While few emergency managers would question the need to be honest, candor and openness are difficult to achieve in the high-uncertainty context of a crisis.

A number of impediments to honesty, candor, and openness are associated with risk and crisis communication. Risks are always associated with some level of uncertainty, and crises are, by definition, high-uncertainty events, where information

is often not immediately available. Some impediments are perceptual, such as the myth of panic and the resulting tendency of public officials to withhold information. Some are structural, such as the loss in communication technologies that often accompanies large-scale disasters. Often, crisis managers believe that, by withholding information, they are operating in the best interest of the public. By so doing, they risk reducing trust. Maintaining honesty, candor, and openness in spite of the impediments is a fundamental exigency of most crisis communication.

6. Collaborate and Coordinate with Credible Sources

The expert panel emphasized the need to establish strategic partnerships before a crisis occurs. These collaborative relationships allow agencies to coordinate their messages and activities. Developing a pre-crisis network is a very effective way of coordinating and collaborating with other credible sources. To maintain effective networks, crisis planners and communicators should continuously seek to validate sources, choose subject-area experts, and develop relationships with stakeholders at all levels. Coordinating messages enhances the probability of consistent messages and may reduce the confusion the public experiences. Consistency of message is one important benchmark of effective crisis communication.

Moreover, coordination and communication with others are usually necessary to mount an effective crisis response. A number of case studies have documented breakdowns in communication and coordination during a crisis response. Among these are the breakdowns in communication between firefighters and police following the World Trade Center disaster and the contradictory messages offered by government agencies following the anthrax attacks. Such breakdowns and contradictions show confusion, create additional uncertainty, and may enhance harm.

7. Meet the Needs of the Media and Remain Accessible

Best practices of crisis communicators, according to the panel of experts, are grounded in effective communication with the media. The media are the primary conduit to the public and, during a crisis, are obligated to report accurately and completely. Rather than viewing the media as a liability in a crisis situation, risk and crisis communicators should engage the media, through open and honest communication, and use the media as a strategic resource to aid in managing the crisis. When communicating with the media, organizations should avoid inconsistency by accepting uncertainty and avoid any temptation to offer overly reassuring messages. Media training should be completed by crisis communicators prior to the onset of a crisis situation. Crisis spokespersons should be identified and trained as part of pre-crisis planning.

In addition, effective use of the media to reach the general public requires accessibility. Scientists sometimes view the public as uninformed and irrational in its understanding of risk and, as a consequence, may believe communicating with the public is counter-productive. Some may even view the media as part of the problem.

There is also a natural tendency to “circle the wagons” or “batten down the hatches” during crisis. Maintaining a dialogic stance, free flow of information, and effective communication requires maintaining openness and accessibility

8. Communicate with Compassion, Concern, and Empathy

Whether communicating with the public, media, or other employers, designated spokespersons should demonstrate appropriate levels of compassion, concern, and empathy. These characteristics significantly enhance the credibility of the message and enhance the perceived legitimacy of the messenger both before and after an event. The public responds much more positively to spokespersons who acknowledge their concerns and demonstrate human compassion for any harm that may have occurred. If the public sees an expression of genuine concern and empathy, it has more faith that the actions being undertaken or recommended are appropriate and legitimate. In other words, an expression of concern and empathy reframes both the crisis-related message and actions. Some crisis spokespersons may be reluctant, however, to frame their statements with expressions of concern and empathy for fear of appearing unprofessional. These efforts to maintain professionalism are often perceived by the public to be cold and uncaring. The resulting perception may undermine the message and credibility of the messenger.

9. Accept Uncertainty and Ambiguity

An additional best practice of crisis communication identified by the expert panel begins with an acknowledgment of the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in a crisis situation. Risks always include some level of uncertainty. This inherent uncertainty often complicates the decision to issue warning messages, such as recalls of food products that may be contaminated. Warnings and recalls often must be issued even when some level of uncertainty exists about the exact nature of the harm. Waiting until all uncertainty is reduced usually means that the warning is simply too late.

Crises and disasters are, by definition, abnormal, dynamic, and unpredictable events. Crisis spokespersons, however, often feel a need to be overly certain and overly reassuring. This may be largely a consequence of a belief that the public cannot accept uncertainty situations and needs certainty in the face of a crisis, even when information is simply unavailable. However, overly reassuring statements in the face of an inherently uncertain and equivocal situation may reduce a spokesperson’s credibility. This is particularly the case as a crisis evolves in an unexpected, unpredictable way. In addition, over-reassuring statements that lack credibility may even create higher levels of alarm.

A best practice of crisis communication, then, is to acknowledge the uncertainty inherent in the situation with statements such as, “The situation is fluid,” and, “We do not yet have all the facts.” This form of strategic ambiguity allows the communicator to refine the message as more information becomes available and avoids statements that are likely to be shown as inaccurate as more information

becomes available (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). Acknowledging uncertainty should not be used as a strategy, however, to avoid disclosing uncomfortable information or closing off further communication.

10. Messages of Self-Efficacy

The public health literature and risk communication research have emphasized the importance of messages that provide specific information telling people what they can do to reduce their harm. These messages of self-efficacy can help restore some sense of control over an uncertain and threatening situation. Moreover, these messages may, ultimately, help reduce the harm created by a risk factor.

These messages may vary widely based on the nature of the event. They may include recommendations to avoid particular kinds of foods or food products, process food in particular ways, ensure appropriate hygiene, seek specific kinds of medical treatment, or monitor for particular kinds of symptoms. In most cases, self-efficacy may be as simple as encouraging stakeholders to monitor the media for additional developments. The specific action recommended must be matched to the specifics of the situation.

Messages of self-efficacy are most effective when they have specific characteristics. First, they recommend specific harm-reducing actions to those affected by the crisis. Messages might also focus on what can be done to help others (e.g., donate food or money, avoid the accident area, and check on neighbors). Second, messages of self-efficacy should also offer a range of activities. The CDC recommends, for example, including what should be done and what else might be done. Third, actions that may not have specific, demonstrable benefit may also be meaningful to the public. Displaying the U.S. flag following the 9/11 attacks was a powerful action that helped manage public anxiety. Finally, even those public responses to risks that seem disproportional may serve important social functions. Unless specific actions may actually serve to increase the harm, public officials should be cautious about discounting actions.

Messages of self-efficacy need to be constructed carefully so that the reason for the action is clear, so that they are consistent, and so that the recommended action is meaningful. Without an understanding of why the action is recommended, stakeholders may misinterpret the message, or unintended meanings may arise. Inconsistent messages, particularly when specific behaviors are being recommended, create confusion and will reduce the probability that the desired action will be taken. Finally, the action should have both real and apparent utility in reducing the harm.

Discussion

The ten best practices for crisis communication outlined here are general standards rather than specific prescriptions about methods, channels, and messages. These best practices do not constitute a plan, but are the principles or processes that underlie an effective crisis communication plan and an effective crisis response. Moreover, the ten

best practices outlined here overlap and are interrelated in a number of important areas. In their application, they are likely to function together, complementing one another, although sometimes they may conflict. For example, if crisis planning, one of the best practices, is not followed, implementing the other best practices will be difficult. Failure to be open and honest will undermine efforts to build strategic partnerships. Thus, a well-integrated approach to crisis communication is warranted. Finally, it is important to reiterate the point that crises and disasters are inherently unpredictable, chaotic events. Any effort to articulate a generalized set of standards should first acknowledge that every crisis is a unique event that can be expected to evolve in unexpected ways.

Notes

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- [2] These authors have offered a number of other, related best-practice approaches. Reynolds (2002), for example, has included a number of principles for effective crisis communication in the CDC's CERC manual. Covello (1992, 2003) has offered nine best practices for health communication. Reynolds and Seeger (2005) have described a series of activities that should be undertaken at different stages of a crisis. Sandman and Lanard (2004) have offered 25 recommendations for effective crisis communication.

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