Crisis Communication Handbook

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Crisis
Communication
Handbook

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Crisis Communication Handbook

The requirement for rapid, accurate information is greater than ever during a serious crisis situation. Handling a crisis properly demands thorough preparation work and a well-thought out communication strategy.

This book is based on a Swedish crisis communication handbook and provides advice and recommendations on how to structure information activities, and on how to communicate before, during and after a crisis. The handbook is intended to provide a general familiarity with important information management issues during a crisis.

The handbook can be used as training material, guidance material and a reference book, and is aimed primarily at people who will be responsible for information during a crisis.

Experience gained from past events and research in this field shows that communication issues comprise up to 70 or 80 percent of an emergency management team's activities during an emergency. This manual can, therefore, also be used by management and decision-making bodies to gain an overall picture of what is required of them during an emergency and of the importance of information-related activities in the overall context of emergency management.

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What we mean by a crisis

The word, *crisis*, comes from the Greek word, *krinein*, which means *to decide*. It refers, in other words, to a decisive phase in a sequence of events and was often used in the past to describe the phase in the course of an illness that meant a decisive turn for the better or the worse.

It is virtually impossible to capture every aspect of a crisis in a single definition. What we are talking about here, however, is a situation that overwhelms society's problem-solving resources, that threatens to tear society's control systems apart, and which can hence devastate the day-to-day lives of a great many people.

The type of crisis for which we are preparing here might be a flood, a break in the power supply, a gas leak, a crash or shipwreck, or the release of radioactive substances, for example. It could also be deliberately provoked by a group, e.g. terrorism, sabotage, boycotts or computer hacking. A crisis can also occur as a result of misconduct, fraud, or changing values and behavioural patterns.

Crisis are usually characterised by happening suddenly, involving many different actors, a need to take decisions under severe time pressure and conditions of uncertainty, and by the media both being involved in and describing the crisis.

The crisis from different perspectives

It is important to recognise and prepare for the following, which are the main components of the crisis concept:

- ➤ An unexpected event
- ➤ That poses **a threat or a challenge**
- ➤ Which is **potentially hazardous**
- ➤ Which requires **immediate, rapid action**
- ➤ Over which **management has limited control**
- ➤ Which may have **unpredictable effects and consequences**
- ➤ And which is something that **will arouse interest by the general public and media**

Recognition of the following aspects is important when defining a crisis from what is primarily a media information perspective:

- ➤ **Something important** is at stake
- ➤ It will become a matter of **public knowledge**
- ➤ It **concerns** the general public
- ➤ It has **geographical** or **cultural proximity**
- ➤ **Someone is "guilty"**

For some individuals, serious crisis often involve existential problems which may result, among other things, in the following:

- ➤ Strong **personal** feelings
- ➤ **Self-perception** being turned upside down
- ➤ Other people's **values** becoming apparent.

Taking the initiative is important

Quite apart from the risk of physical injury, the crisis simultaneously poses a threat to the individual's and organisation's credibility, and hence often touches on and calls into question that individual's or organisation's confidence.

This is why when planning crisis management, it is not enough to look back on previous experiences, or simply to react passively to certain sequences of events with material measures. It is far more important to try to be creative in predicting future events, and to be ready to mentally handle them in an active manner.

Crisis management is very much a matter of handling psychological problems and of doing certain things in the right order. Therefore it has to do with an attitude of mind and a well thought out approach, and with combining this with the more materially-orientated activities.

So forward-looking planning and preparing are required to operate during a crisis.
- **Be proactive**, not simply reactive.
- **Decide** what are the right things to do, and do them in the right way.
- **Establish fast** but clear-thinking, rational leadership and decision-making.
- **Gain insight** into long-term and short-term values.
- **Develop the ability** to bring in the right advisory and decision-making expertise.

- **Ensure clear information provision** for your own employees, the general public, managers and the media.
- **Be honest** about what is happening and about things that you either do not or cannot know.
- **Respect** the media's working conditions.
- **Utilise** human and material resources to achieve the most optimal result.
- **Be able to work** with the right things, even when under severe physical and mental pressure.
- **Work together** with and in cooperation with other organisations outside of your own.
- **Take care** of yourself and other people so that people and the organisation do not become worn-out.

Crisis management could be said to take place both during preventative and preparatory phases and during the acute state and the recovery stage after the crisis. Those who have been involved in national and international crisis are unanimous – efficient communication during crisis is based on comprehensive, insightful preventative and preparatory measures, e.g. staff education, training and exercises, on correctly dimensioning the communications technology resources, and on information officers having established an efficiently functioning network before the crisis.

The perceived crisis is the real one

It is absolutely vital in a crisis that the management accepts that outside world's "perception is reality", and from this starting point, they work with people's concerns, questions and worries – from their horizon, in other words, not from the management's own.

When people believe they are in danger, it doesn't help when an authority "in charge" of the situation says that this is not the case. What is needed are clear actions and information from several completely independent and credible sources, usually in the individual's immediate surroundings.

This might seem simple, but management most commonly fails on this point because it is approaching the problem on the basis of the facts it possesses, and not of people's impressions and perceptions. Information must, therefore, be based on what people want to know from their viewpoints, and not primarily on what the authority wants to say.

It is important to understand that perceptions of risk and threat shift with the degree of:

- ➤ **Voluntarily.** Self-accepted risks are more easily accepted than imposed ones.
- ➤ **Control.** When the individual is "at the controls", the risk (but possibly not the danger) is regarded as less than when some authority is responsible.
- ➤ **Familiarity.** Exotic, peculiar, incomprehensible technologies trigger stronger feelings than risks with which we are familiar (in the home, car, etc.).
- ➤ **Scale in time and space.** We have a tendency to react to dangers that are close to home.

Crisis communication

Crisis communication can be defined as the exchange of information that occurs within and between authorities, organisations, media and interested individuals, and groups, before, during and after a crisis.

There are three important dimensions during a crisis: the actual crisis, the way authorities and organisations handle the crisis, and the crisis image. The biggest problems often arise not from the actual emergency, but from the way in which various actors handle or mishandle it, e.g. through poor preparation, difficulties in improvising and being flexible, incomplete knowledge of what has happened, actors, problems in understanding new roles and functions, etc.

Every actor has his/hers own perception of whether there is a crisis, and of the extent of the crisis, its nature and consequences for the individual and the organisation. Everyone is a decision-maker during a crisis. The authorities must, therefore, be well informed of different actors, perceptions and knowledge of different processes and situations.

Substantial numbers of actors often

become involved in conjunction with a crisis: those affected and next of kin, authorities and organisations, local, national and international media, and volunteers. The crisis will arouse interest and commitment in many people, but it will also trigger curiosity. In addition to providing information for all the various interested parties, the crisis management team must also, for example, create perhaps entirely new routines for receiving vips and keeping the curious away from the crisis area.

The media have a crucial role

One of the most typical characteristics of a crisis is that an intense need for information develops very quickly. It is all about handling operational information, updates, advice and guidance and masses of questions. It is also about analysing myths, rumours and decisions – and everything has to be done simultaneously.

The huge volume of information that has to be exchanged often results in various information channels being overloaded.

The image that various interested parties have of a crisis is created, to a very large extent, by the media. The media decide whether they want to cover the crisis, how they are going to describe it, and in what forms different decisions and activities are to be presented.

The authorities must assume that the crisis image is as real as the crisis itself, and that substandard handling of the image during a crisis can result in
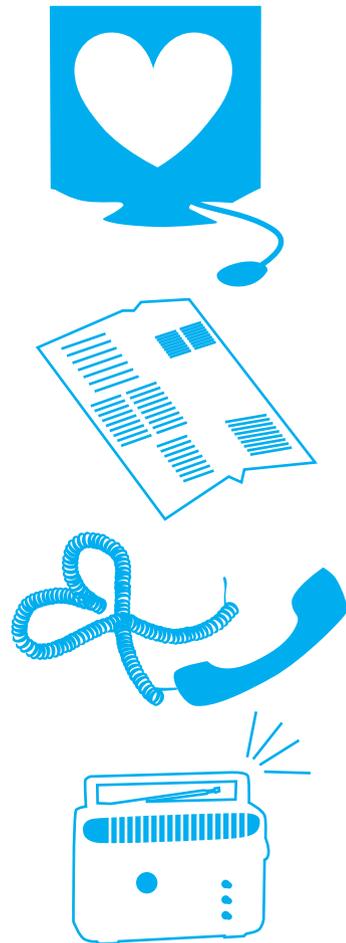
the actual crisis expanding or taking a different form and direction. This is why, the crisis and the crisis image must be handled in parallel during a crisis.
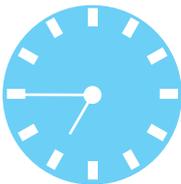
Underlying approach

Successful crisis communication is based on that there is a professionally run information operation already in place. This means, among other things, that the authority has an information policy that lays out the organisation's underlying approach, e.g. the requirement for openness, speed, ease of availability, credibility, being proactive rather than reactive, and the belief that the operations must be based on good planning, cooperation with others, and ongoing evaluation. Various technical resources for issuing and receiving information are also necessary (phones, faxes, IT etc.)

The outside world is characterised by an enormous and rapidly growing range of information, stiff competition for attention, information that is transmitted incredibly quickly around the clock, often independently of time and place. People have access to new media systems and hence develop new media habits, e.g. by monitoring the international news through, the Internet or other foreign media.

And so it is becoming increasingly important that the authorities develop a systematic method of analysis in which they continuously scan the outside world and monitor different events and actors. The cultural diversity and inter-

national interchange also mean that today's information unit must have a multicultural competence. One of the most important tasks of the professional information officer nowadays often also involve gathering, compiling, evaluating and reporting to the management on changes in the organisation's outside world that must be taken into account as part of the operational and planning work.

The authority's communication with different interested parties must start with the recipient. It is the individual recipient's requirements, expectations, specific situation and media habits that collectively determine the information that should be sent. This is true not only for all information that citizens, groups, organisations and companies look for, gather and use, but also for the channels they use and for determining what information they find credible and retain because of importance or interest.

This dialogue with different recipients demands that the authority presents its starting points, values and intentions honestly. The authority must actively work to achieve and maintain a high degree of credibility – the most important concept in crisis communication.

The recipients rate the authority's credibility on the basis of four fundamental dimensions:

➤ **degree of openness and honesty**
➤ **the organisation's competence**
➤ **the fairness of their actions**
➤ **the empathy displayed**

The information officer analyses, plans, implements and evaluates his/her activities within the framework of the authority's strategic goals, considerations and decisions.

The information officer should also always take into account the ethical and moral consequences of various activities.

So how should an information function be built up before crisis etc.? How should successful crisis communication be conducted? What must the authorities do before the emergency occurs? How should they act during the crisis and how should they exploit experience gained? These are the questions that are at the heart of this manual.

To be prepared

How well the communication works during a real crisis depends on how well, an authority, has prepared itself before the crisis and the level of credibility achieved. This is why a large part of this particular book concentrates on describing how authorities can create a structure, build up an awareness of emergencies and crisis management, and, as part of their planning, take into account the sort of problems that usually arise during crisis.

When a crisis occurs, authorities must not only act quickly, they must also handle the massive information flows generated systematically and sustainably, and must establish systems that enable them both to get their message across externally and to gather valuable information from outside.

Once the crisis is over, it is vital not only to learn from the experience gained but – and this is the really difficult part – to translate what has been learned into new routines, plans and exercises.

Authorities, internal organisations must be characterised by an awareness of potential crisis and how to handle them. The tendency in an crisis is for everyone affected to become a decision-maker, so it is vital to establish clear guidelines on the measures that need to be taken and the resources required before the crisis is upon us.

A special information department with four main duties is needed to achieve an overview, and to ensure cooperation and efficiency. These duties are:
- ➤ **Analysing** the information requirement and the range of information provided
- ➤ **Assisting** in strategic assessments and decisions
- ➤ **Producing** information
- ➤ **Receiving** and distributing internal and outgoing information

The tasks of the information department are very extensive and diverse. The precise structure of the information department can, of course, vary greatly, depending on the overall scale of the operations and its resources. The number of people working within each unit does, of course, depend on both the nature and scope of the crisis and the availability of personnel. It is not unrealistic to assume that several of the functions described below will be handled temporarily by a single person. It is, however, important to discuss requirements and scope internally.

Credibility can be an absolutely critical factor in a crisis situation. This is why the crisis preparedness work should prioritise establishing a high degree of credibility.

This brochure will systematically review every aspect required in good crisis preparation and will provide concrete proposals for structuring and planning the information department.

Crisis awareness

The authority's management team should actively support the emergency planning work in word and deed. This may mean allocating resources, management's participation in project groups, stressing the need for good planning in various contexts, and taking part in the various exercises held.

All our expertise utilised within the authority's organisation must work together. This is particularly important when it comes to the people responsible for crisis planning e.g. emergency coordinators and people responsible for information.

A high level of emergency awareness demands, among other things, that ongoing attention is paid to crisis management within the authority's internal organisation so that everyone, whatever field they happen to work in, takes it on board.

Crisis often mean that the usual hierarchical decision-making models are unable to function due to their time-consuming normal bureaucratic, so the rule system implemented under normal circumstances must be simplified. The experience gained in these situations must be translated into an awareness on the part of managers and other personnel, so that everyone involved in an emergency can work flexibly towards a common goal, improvise and set aside any thoughts of personal prestige.

Crisis awareness requires internal support

If an organisational support base is to be established, it is very important that the management and the information department share the same set of fundamental principles with regard to what good crisis information can bring to the organisation.

These principles may, for example, involve the need for external analysis, definition of relevant information objectives and of how they are to be measured, and the need to know and understand the consequences of the way in which the media evaluate and convey news. Information-related activities are a strategic resource for every aspect of the operations and must not be allowed to become a budgetary extra!

The goals of the information-related activities must be thoroughly integrated with the overall objectives of subordinate authorities. Both these goals and the planned activities must form part of a special crisis communication plan. The information function should be represented at the most senior levels of the authority in question.

It is almost impossible for an authority to carry out strategic assessments of how to handle the crisis image if the Head of Information is not part of the management team.

Crisis communication

The quality of the day-to-day contact with the outside world is critical in determining how well the information department can handle its tasks during a crisis. Firstly, the department must have a systematic and ongoing analysis of the outside world, and secondly, the authority must make every effort to create a network incorporating everyone who may potentially be involved in different types of emergencies. The authority must also have a correctly sized and versatile communication technology capacity that can expand rapidly in the event of a crisis.

External analyses provide early warnings

An external analysis fulfils a number of functions. Not only does it give the authority the opportunity to detect warning signs at an early stage, it also ensures that the authority is aware of facts, principles, opinions and behaviour on the part of external parties and which may necessitate adjustments by the authority.

New parties might, for example, have entered the arena, while others may have wound down their activities. Journalists may have changed the way they work as a result of new technology or of increasingly diverse media habits among the population.

And thirdly, external analyses generate the potential for focus studies of particular issues, and for seeing how they are received and handled over the course of time by a range of parties, e.g. charitable or international organisations, or

researchers at universities and colleges of further education.

Networks of extra resources

The point of a network is to build knowledge of and confidence between different important parties with whom the information department needs to cooperate during crisis.

The network is particularly necessary in contacts with other authorities. The parties need to discuss the allocation of tasks, responsibilities and roles, demarcations, and changing linguistic use and terminology. Discussions should be held on the forms to be taken by telecommunications and data technology-related cooperation and on the fundamental principles that guide the respective authorities, information activities, e.g. the degree of openness to the outside world.

This network should include both horizontal contacts, e.g. between local authorities, and vertical ones, e.g. between a local authority and a governmental authority. The network should be activated during a crisis to ensure that everyone who needs it gets the same information in real time and that dialogues can be conducted between different parties before the information is released to the media.

The information unit also needs a network of suppliers, e.g. photographers, printers, transport services, workshops, interpreters and translators etc. It also needs its own personnel to handle switchboards and information desks, and external call centres to take some of the load when switchboards and information desks are under abnormally heavy strain.

There is also a need for a network from which the information unit can recruit personnel to various units or functions that need reinforcement during a crisis, e.g. to the analysis unit, and made up of people such as information officers from major companies or PR consultants, journalists, university researchers, international relations experts, personnel within the authority with specialist skills, and potentially, agreements or contracts with personnel from voluntary organisations.

Pre-prepared registers

The authority should build up in advance a number of registers, designed for use both when searching for key personnel (such as interpreters) and when distributing information to special groups (e.g. employees, families).

The registers should be structured in a way that enables them to be used very quickly to disseminate information via group faxes, Intranets, e-mail, fliers or letters.

One overall requirement – regardless of the matter covered by the register or the channel used to convey the information it contains – is that the information can be distributed quickly – in some cases, very quickly.

Examples of registers:
- ➤ **Subcontractors** such as photographers, artists, printers, courier vans.
- ➤ **Employees** as a whole and divided into sub-groups.
- ➤ **Employees, families.**
- ➤ **The media, and media sub-groups**, such as local, regional, national and international media.
- ➤ **News media on the Internet.**
- ➤ **Authorities** and key people within these authorities.
- ➤ **International contacts.**
- ➤ **Interpreters.**
- ➤ **Stand-bys.**

Remember that a register is a fresh product. If the registers are to work, there must be routines for continuously updating them. Remember also the laws that apply to the drawing up of registers. Outsourcing the register function to specialist companies is another option.

The authority should use the distribution channels already established and in use today. Websites can provide an efficient means of mass distributing information.

Communications technology skills

If authorities are to be able to conduct a dialogue with the outside world during a crisis, they must have built up a communications technology capacity capable of handling the massive volumes of calls and contacts that can develop very rapidly.

The information unit must have access to skilled personnel who are responsible for ensuring that the communications technology systems work. This means both the ability to handle the systems for which the unit itself is responsible, such as computers, faxes, telephone switchboards and the skill to consult with other parties in the field and contract in services from telecommunications technology companies, Internet operators, call centres for example.

These technical systems should have a very substantial capacity. Access to power reserves in several alternative systems is also a must. The authorities must have channels both for mass distribution of information and for messages aimed at only a few recipients.

Even if a large number of questions require the same answer, there is a simultaneous requirement for very specific information on the part of certain individuals or groups.

Channels, which are independent of time and place and systems that take into account recipients with special requirements due to physical or psychological handicaps, must also be established.

Credibility

The most important precondition for handling a crisis successfully is that an authority can enter the crisis situation with a high degree of credibility already in place. Without this, the authority's analysis, assessments, decisions and recommendations will not be taken sufficiently seriously when individuals, groups, organisations and companies,

associations and the media are taking decisions.

So what does an authority have to do to be credible in the eyes of the outside world?

Credibility is built from four components: *openness, competence, fairness* and *empathy*.

1. Openness means that the authority presents facts, know-how and sources, and its considerations openly and, among other things, that it is honest about the interests that the authority is tasked with representing. It must be willing to enter into a dialogue with the outside world and to take on board new concerns.

2. In-house competence includes the outside world being able to look back on previous positive experiences of various activities on the part of the authority. This presupposes that the authority possesses genuine competence and that there is a very close match between what the authority says and what it does.

3. The authority is perceived as fair when it discusses both positive and negative aspects of its activities, and when it accepts that other evaluations and principles exist. The authority must also be very open about its own decision-making process.

4. It is important to people caught up in a crisis resulting from an accident, disaster, criminality etc. that the authority's

personnel are perceived as having a strong desire to understand and appreciate the seriousness of the situation for the person affected, and that the personnel display empathy.

High levels of credibility are built by taking all four of these factors into account. If this credibility exists, the authority has considerable freedom to act once a crisis has occurred. But it must act quickly.

Building up credibility

The following list of factors that build up credibility may be of use when training personnel in crisis management.

➤ **Know-how.** A combination of theoretical knowledge and the sort that comes from experience is most valuable.

➤ **Character** is a dynamic comprising several factors that we normally value more highly than others: honesty and fairness, for example. Most people want to know the truth, as far as possible, even if it might be unpleasant. No one wants to get information from people who lie deliberately. We must, however, respect the fact that there may be some information that should be kept secret and stay within a smaller circle of people. Another aspect of character, therefore, is what one could call personal integrity, i.e. the strength of character to resist tempting pressure of various kinds, e.g. bribes or other forms of personal gain.

➤ **Extrovert characteristics are important.** Such as the willingness and ability to communicate, being open and receptive to arguments and views, and actively seeking out information, not simply responding when you receive it.

➤ **A fourth factor has to do with professionalism.** This means being composed in terms of the attention you give to your tasks and the way you concentrate on them, and knowing what is happening and what is important through your internal and external know-how organisation. Another aspect of professionalism is that a clear structure, a pattern, can be detected in what you do, that there is a "storyboard", a pattern to your decision- making, and that there is a consistency to your actions over time, i.e. that you actually make good decisions which have a good democratic support base, and that you make sure they are implemented, even if these decisions encounter opposition from time to time.

➤ **The fifth factor is linked to the previous one and has to do with being consistent and not contradictory in your logic, speech and actions.** Inconsistency is an irritating characteristic and can also lead to what are known as double messages.

➤ **The sixth and final factor is that you demonstrate a social sensitivity** and empathy for the people around you. It's a matter of fundamental respect for other people and their integrity, of showing empathy for people having a hard time, and of genuinely caring about other people and their lives and activities.

Organising crisis management

Proposed basic structure for the information department during a crisis situation:

Management

A clearly designated manager who is part of the crisis management group should head the information activities. This person is responsible for ensuring that information issues are taken into account and that the information flow to and from the authority functions satisfactorily. The management should also make sure that the importance and role of the information activities are clearly understood by everyone involved.

Analysis unit

The analysis group is a unit with no direct part in the operational work, and whose primary task is, instead, to assist the management by providing the source data on which they base their decisions.

The group is, in particular, responsible for assessing the type of information needed by different parties, before, during and after a crisis. Every individual, household, and local, regional and central organisation – whatever its operational sphere or ownership structure and whoever its principal may be – is facing its own, unique situation and has its own unique information requirement. The authority's crisis communication must, therefore, always be based on these different recipient's situations.

The group should continuously analyse the course of events, different parties,

contributions, and the image of the crisis among the general public and the media.

The main focus of these assessments is on how these aspects will develop in the longer term and on assessing the consequences for the authority.

The analysis unit should also be responsible for following up on the goals established by the authority for contacts with the outside world. The authority should, for example, calculate how many incoming calls hear a busy tone, how long it takes before the unit replies, the average length of the calls, the volume of calls and the variations throughout the day.

Incoming calls and the replies given should be noted in a database, or in some other way. An analysis should be carried out of the most common questions, and switchboard operators and other people should then be supplied with details that allow them to answer these questions quickly (e.g. an automatic voice response function).

Frequently asked questions should be noted and the answers posted on the website, passed on to the media to ensure that a number of requirements are met as quickly as possible.

Group members should be recruited both internally and externally. Information Officers at major companies, professional communication consultants, university researchers, international relations experts are all possible suitable candidates.

Producing unit

It is also vital to have a group prepared to start producing different types of messages and communication to internal and external parties immediately.

Journalists may need background material, texts, images, graphics and films of processes, statements from those responsible, statistics, lists of information detailing the consequences of the crisis.

Interested parties need ongoing information on the way the crisis is developing and answers to the most common questions, descriptions of the situation, advice and recommendations, lists of organisations that can assist etc.

This unit needs wide-ranging skills in the field of in-house production or rapid procurement of a large variety of products, conveyed through several different channels.

Media relations unit

The overall purpose of a media unit is to be the media's primary source of up-to-date and reliable information on the crisis.

The interaction with the media is incredibly important in a crisis situation. This is why a good cooperation must be established during "normal conditions" so that the authority already has good personal contacts in place, if and when something happens.

The media unit has three main duties:
1. **Facilitating** journalist's work.
2. **Actively conveying** the authority's view of the crisis and the way it is developing.
3. **Analysing** media's content.
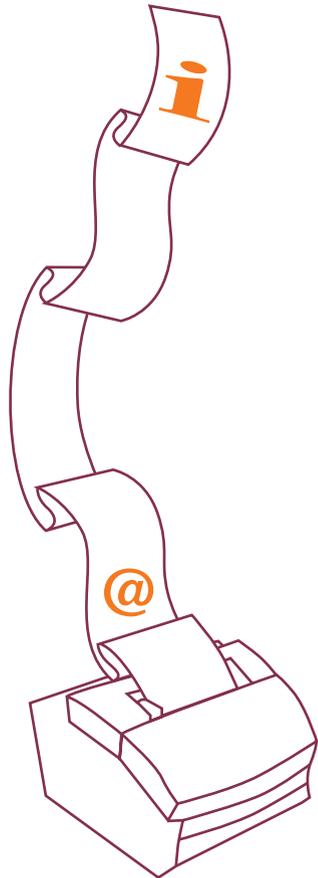
1. Facilitating journalists work

Use periods when conditions are normal to get to know the journalists who cover your field. Remember that journalists are concerned with news and compete with other journalists to report it first.

Prepare basic information

During a crisis, journalists need not only news material, but basic information too. The media want source data, operational descriptions, guidelines and plans, closing accounts, job descriptions etc. This means that the authority must produce plans, outline graphics, photos, video features, fact sheets in advance.

This general background information must be ready before the crisis occurs and should be stored in a way that makes it easily accessible and easy to work with. In addition to using traditional printed and audio-visual products, the authority can also create a digital archive on the Internet to which the media can turn for access to directly usable material.

If the authority does not want to handle the archiving and distribution in-house, there are companies that specialise in providing these services and that should be brought in on a contractual basis to provide support during crisis.

It is important to know how the media works with news:
- **The message** – the news should preferably be formulated under a headline.
- **The information after the headline** is designed to capture people's interest

and to encourage them to read or listen further.
- **Brief,** simple language.
- **Pictures, graphics** make it easier to understand complicated information.
- **Similes** can be used to clarify matters.
- Journalists **try to predict the general public's questions** and to answer them in their news item.
- Journalists will **quickly be looking to provide advice** to the general public.

If you can help the media by providing support for this approach, it will allow you to get your important message across quicker and more reliably.

2. Getting the authority's viewpoint across

The authority needs to be able to get its viewpoint on the crisis, its development, consequences for different parties, internal decisions, statements by politicians and officials across, quickly and clearly.

The authority should also take active steps to draw the media's attention to important aspects of its crisis management. This can take the form of a daily briefing on the authority's view of the course of events and of things planned or expected to happen during the day, and, at the end of the day, of a summary of what has happened.

The authorities can also provide examples of aspects of emergency work, e.g. the use of databases, different methods of analysing data gathered, application of various kinds of equipment, experiences

of people at the heart of the emergency, guided tours of the emergency area.

There may be times when in-house assessments and analyses, and measures proposed for various parties must be presented unambiguously on the authority's terms. When this is the case, the authority should consider complementing the information supplied to the media's editorial departments with advertisements in both printed media and commercial broadcast media, as well as via their own website on the Internet. The unit should also prepare and support people who will be interviewed and support those who do not wish to be interviewed (e.g. next of kin or people affected).

3. Analysing media's content

The media should be regarded as an important co-actor during all types of crisis! They are namely the fastest means of getting a message across to the general public. The media are often the first who can present changing circumstances during a crisis. They monitor, analyse and criticise, describe and present.

It is important for authorities to monitor how the image of the crisis is publicised and commented on in the media, because the general public's perception of what is happening is shaped by the media's descriptions.

A special group should, therefore, be set up to read and listen to what is written, said and shown in the various media. The material gathered in this way should be analysed from a number of viewpoints:

> Is the image correct?
> Which actors appear?
> What statements are made?
> How is your authority portrayed?
> Is the course of events described correctly?
> Does it offer any new information for the crisis management team?
> Are the media passing on rumours?
> Are there any factual errors?

The analysis should assess the way in which the crisis image in the media affects the way in which the emergency develops and is managed, and should identify trends and potential problems.

The analysed material can be used in a variety of ways. It can not only provide daily overviews of the media's monitoring of events for the authority's own personnel and other parties involved, it can also initiate actions on the part of the authorities aimed at counteracting inaccuracies, factual errors or false rumours, and to make recommendations to the crisis management team.

The Internet as an information forum

There should be a special function within the unit that focuses on the Internet. The primary task of this function in a crisis situation is the rapid and ongoing updating of the media-orientated websites.

They can include a description of events, analysis of incoming questions, presentation of the management's assessments, new parties and addresses, state-

ments by people responsible, details of meetings and conferences.

From the reverse viewpoint, the function should also analyse how the crisis is being described and discussed on the Internet so that they can pass this information on to the analysis unit.

Information centre unit

The purpose of this unit is to act as an intermediate link between the authority and the general public.

The information centre has three main tasks:
- ➤ **Answering** the general public's questions.
- ➤ **Providing details** of the authority's assessments, decisions and measures.
- ➤ **Drawing attention** to a variety of incoming information from the outside world that needs to be passed on to the crisis management team.

The unit should consist both of numerous people who have direct contact with events and of a coordinating and analytical group that is responsible for the contact with the crisis management team and other cooperating authorities. This group should also update personnel manning the phones and be responsible for ensuring that the entire unit can function on a long-term basis, primarily by planning personnel's working hours.

The information centre should be structured to receive and answer external contacts, irrespective of the channel used. This means using not only the
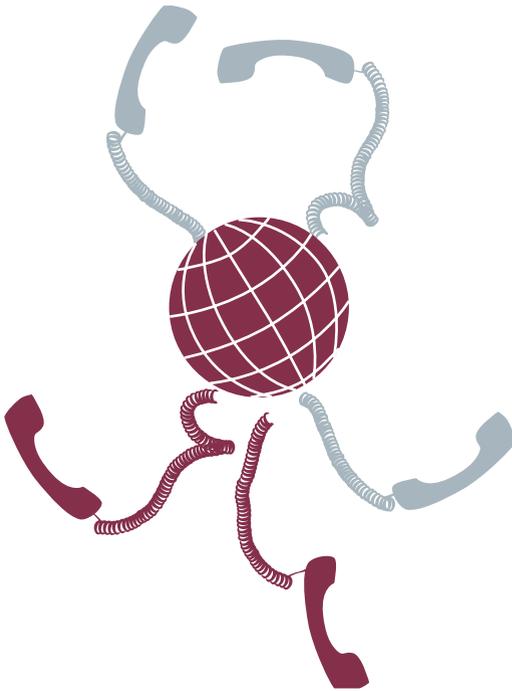
phone, but faxes, letters and messages via websites or e-mail.

The information centre must, as a result, have a generously sized switchboard capacity with well-developed functions for queuing. The information centre should have its own phone number that bypasses the authority's regular switchboard. Many authorities may find it useful to have an agreement with call centres, i.e. specialist companies that can help the authority by off-loading incoming calls.

Depending on the type of crisis and when it occurs, it may be appropriate to reinforce the information centre with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Details of interpreters should be included in the registers that accompany the emergency plan. The voluntary organisations are usually interested in providing charitable assistance during crisis, so they can also be a good source for recruiting stand-bys.

Internal information unit

If the authority is to be able to deal with the outside world in a coordinated manner, internal information must flow between different units, irrespective of the geographical distance, time differences, cultural characteristics and duties involved.

This internal coordination must be discussed, approved and practised in advance.

Employees must, if possible, receive information before the media – and

certainly no later than them. This asks a great deal in terms of the development of internal information systems for everyday use but which can also be used during crisis – when speed is even more critical. If the authority is to be able to compete at all with the media when it comes to being first to inform its personnel, there must be specialist staff in the information unit who have this as their primary task and who have immediate access to all new information.

Employees must receive ongoing information on what is happening, and on their particular authority,s tasks and activities. Particular attention must be paid to the employees, next of kin, so that they can simultaneously handle the crisis and rest assured that their next of kin know what is going on.

Coordination unit

The unit has three main tasks:

➤ Firstly, it must help to ensure that **coordinated information is distributed as efficiently as possible during the crisis.** This will help to reduce the overall information flow by avoiding double or triple amounts of information, e.g. due to information repetition.

➤ Secondly, the unit **should work to coordinate the information passed between the authorities** so that misunderstanding, double messages or contradictory information is kept to the minimum level possible.

➤ Thirdly, the unit should **supply cooperating authorities with ongoing details** of its own authority's assessments, evaluations, decisions and measures, together with information on the crisis development.

This exchange of information can be achieved by relocating personnel from the authority's information unit to a common emergency management team or other authorities, or by creating a special Intranet where cooperating authorities continuously post information, relating both to their own activities, and to information scheduled for issue or already issued to the outside world.

Documentation unit

This unit is responsible for noting important decisions and information activities in chronological order. This is vital in order to avoid the spread of double messages or messages not in phase with the course of events.

Simple, easy to operate rules should be formulated and straightforward forms, instructions etc. developed before and during the crisis. This is not a job to be taken lightly but one carried out in the shadows, and one that is often neglected, but its importance is considerable and it should, therefore, be strongly supported by the management team. Overall responsibility should, if possible, be assigned to a single individual.

Once the crisis is over, the documenta-

tion provides important source material for evaluation work and in generating proposals for improvement.

The authority's outgoing information must be registered and saved. This means taping radio and TV interviews, saving all press releases, saving not only all important questions to and answers from the information centre but statistics too, and documenting all contacts with other authorities etc.

Correspondingly, incoming information, such as clips of media coverage, material from other authorities, statistics detailing the number of incoming calls, homepage hits, the number of e-mails received etc., must also be saved.

Multicultural service unit

This group reflects all of the other tasks covered by the information unit. The particular task of this unit is to highlight and resolve the communication problems that can arise due to different cultural characteristics and qualities of a particular group affected by the crisis.

The unit should also take into account special requirements that arise, e.g. as a result of the religious or ethnic affiliation of a group affected.

The group should also be available to the information centre and should take part in discussions with other countries, representatives. Their responsibility includes producing and reviewing material in easily understood language and for those with visual or auditory handicaps.

The group should establish formal and informal networks with organisations, associations and other alliances that represent groups with different cultural affiliations.

Once a crisis has happened

The start of a crisis is the organisation's weakest and most vulnerable moment. If the media paints an inaccurate or distorted picture at this stage, correcting it later is very difficult. The public expects the authorities to do something. And to be seen to be doing something.

Ask yourself, **"If I were an ordinary citizen, what would I want the organisation to be doing and saying?" The answer to this question is usually the right answer!**

And don't forget to think about who is affected by the crisis and about who has the greatest need for information first.

Information vacuum

Authorities of all kinds are often faced by what is known as an information vacuum, i.e. no one knows the sort of information that needs to be provided on important issues. In other words, it is impossible to say clearly and precisely what will happen if financial, technical and social circumstances change in a variety of ways.

Once a crisis has occurred, this situation can arise once or more than once. And this places huge demands on whoever is supposed to handle a situation like this, because this vacuum can lead to more tangible problems, particularly if the situation is also characterised by risks and threats.

In a situation like this, the risk of rumours, conspiracy theories, myths etc.

increases, which can, in turn, lead to some people starting to take various measures that may seem irrational or inadequate to others.

The problem of a total or partial information vacuum must, therefore, be handled with various types of factual information that also include reasonable and satisfactory advice and instructions for the general public. Measures relating to the sort of things people are worried about, for example.

The reverse problem with risk communication is usually – and primarily – that it is difficult to get people involved if they don't feel affected in some way.

This is why ongoing information activities must be intensified in a number of different quarters with the aim both of involving people in important problems or activities, and, wherever possible, of removing the uncertainty and concern that an information vacuum entails.

One more time – cooperation is important

The problem demands very extensive cooperation between the most important informational bodies in society. But today's information society demands that authorities cooperate extensively and that, as far as possible, they try to consult and coordinate with regard to their information.

If this does not happen, incomprehensible, confusing or contradictory information can all too easily be issued from different quarters on identical or similar matters during an crisis or under severe stress. The effects of this, unsurprisingly, can be extremely negative, with increased levels of concern. This is why consultation and cooperation are an important area of operations in the elimination of risks associated with splintered and operationally divided information.

The need for expert help is another important point that must also be taken into account during the initial phase of a crisis or in times of severe stress. This is particularly true with regard to expert knowledge of various aspects of the situation (technical, legal, medical etc.) and which can be of assistance to both management and the information personnel.

Informing next of kin

This group must have a very high priority in terms of the authority's information work.

While the crisis is in progress, next of kin need information on what is happening and what the authorities are doing on their behalf, and help in being put in touch with hospitals, the police and various emergency groups, for example.

The personnel who may be responsible for informing next of kin of severe accidents must be thoroughly prepared and trained for this task. Worried next of kin calling in must be met with genuine commitment and respect. When a death has occurred, it is always the police who inform next of kin.

Today's society is multicultural, which means that information activities must be planned and implemented on the basis of any special linguistics and cultural needs that may exist.

Generating reliable information on who has been affected by an accident and how, as quickly as possible, and thereby reducing the circle of concerned next of kin, is, of course, very important.

It is also extremely important to check all information thoroughly in these contexts, before issuing it to next of kin or the media.

Personnel tasked with talking to concerned individuals or the next of kin of those affected must be given special training or experience in handling this task. The activity should be coordinated with those responsible for staff welfare, churches, the police, medical and social services.

Next of kin will demand to know the following immediately:

➤ **Was he/she there when it happened?**
➤ **Is he/she injured?**
➤ **If he/she is injured, where is he/she now?**
➤ **How bad are the injuries?**
➤ **Where can I see him/her?**
➤ **Which hospital is he/she in?**
➤ **Can you help me get there?**

Once the peak of the crisis is past, a number of specific and serious questions will be asked by next of kin and those affected. These questions will relate to housing, food and clothing, work and insurance, sick leave and medical care etc. And in worst case scenarios, taking care of the dead, saying goodbye to them, and funeral arrangements.

The authority should concentrate in particular, within its area of responsibility, by always handling questions and information from next of kin and those affected in a positive manner. In many cases, direct channels can be created.
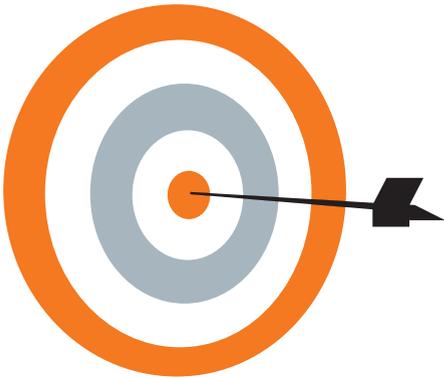
Stages of shock that must be recognised and taken into account, during and after emergencies:

➤ **Shock and anger**
➤ **Denial**
➤ **Guilt**
➤ **Inactivity**
➤ **Healing begins**
➤ **Experimenting with thoughts and courses of action**
➤ **Acceptance**
➤ **Success**
➤ **Growth in confidence**

Inform people in a way that is relevant without scaring them

Information issued to the public or to large groups of people with distinct and specific information requirements must be based on professionally investigated and analysed requirement criteria. Getting important information across to the pub-

lic is reliant on the information corresponding to an interest or need that these people are known to have.

The problem descriptions must, therefore, be relevant and concrete, and should preferably be targeted, not at a mass of anonymous citizens, but at a specific group, and should be structured so that a person can identify with this group. If the information meets this requirement, it also becomes possible, within this framework, to build in the sort of information that is considered important from the narrower perspective of the authority or operations.

All information should be factual and its content should be as practical and concrete as possible. If there are any risks that need to be borne in mind, and of which the public should hence be notified, the information should include references to other measures that may be appropriate in terms of avoiding hazards. Here too, the overall aim should be to ensure that information and measures are described as concretely as possible.

It is best to avoid using all forms of metaphorical language or comparisons that could be misinterpreted when describing risks and hazards.

It is important at all times to provide details of contact points that individuals can approach with their inquiries and to ensure that these points are staffed by personnel capable of answering questions if the public do contact them.

It is also vital to ensure that this organisation is staffed to a sufficient level (including reliefs) that it can cope with a huge information requirement during a relatively short space of time, e.g. after general information has been issued via the media.

Consider implementing fixed information routines

When a crisis situation continues over an extended period of time with intense media monitoring throughout, it may be a good idea to try and come up with more fixed times for information release, e.g. two or three times a day. This makes it easier for everyone involved to submit their source data in good time to allow it to be processed and incorporated into the information released to the media.

Act – don't react

If uncertain sequences of events are to be influenced, a personal effort to influence them is required. Because anyone who makes no effort to do so will, instead, end up being completely controlled by the events, own dynamic and other people's activities.

This is why it is important to implement your own information activities, rather than waiting for things to happen.

Authorities must, in other words, be **PROACTIVE**, not simply **REACTIVE**!

Simple, definite information plans, implemented consistently, affect the sequence of events, not only in the media, but within your own organisation and in cooperative or adjacent activities.

When a crisis occurs out of the blue, the Information Director responsible must immediately activate those units assigned to and prepared for this job. (See Part 2: To be prepared).

- ➤ **Establish a clear division of work** for previously specified tasks if there are still unfilled positions.
- ➤ **What demands may be made** of the information function? If external resources are required for long-term activities, they must be called in at an early stage.
- ➤ **In what way might these demands change** over time, centrally, regionally and locally?
- ➤ **What are our immediate and long-term aims** with regard to different target groups?
- ➤ **What resources do we have** and what limits are there? Are experts needed?
- ➤ **What do our own personnel** and the general public know, and what is being reported in the media?
- ➤ **What immediate conclusions** can we draw and what decisions can we take, here and now?
- ➤ **Which information strategy** should we choose, i.e. what do we want to say, and how are we to get this information across to the people who need it?
- ➤ **What type of information** should be prepared at this stage, both internally and externally, and what requirement is there for cooperation with adjacent operations?
- ➤ **What are the time constraints** – what is the deadline for doing things?
- ➤ **Are there any economic restrictions?**

Start very quickly

An authority should aim to be able to provide information quickly about a crisis that has arisen, whenever it occurs – 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. This means that, in principle, an Information Director must always be contactable and that it must be possible to initiate the following measures on very short notice:

1. **Alert your organisation.**
2. **Appoint an Information Director.**
3. **Activate** the information personnel, according to prepared lists.
4. **Announce contact names** to the media and others.
5. **Open all information channels.**
6. **Tailor the switchboard** to handle increased information pressure and issue instructions.
7. **Set up ongoing monitoring** of the authority's homepage, including the ability to monitor the traffic, gather information and answer questions.
8. **Open the Information Centre.**
9. **Contact other authorities.**

Make time by seeking to gain the information advantage

- ➤ **Find out everything** you can internally.
- ➤ **Carry out a thorough review** with the help of independent institutions.
- ➤ **Find out additional** background information as quickly as possible.
- ➤ **Create a picture quickly** of the information issued by the media – start taping radio/TV broadcasts.

Prepare and make the plan operational

- Inform relevant authorities and decision-makers.
- Ensure that all relevant information goes through the information function.
- Appoint a few people who are tasked exclusively with thinking and planning long-term. Make sure that they do not get dragged into any activities where the stress level is acute.
- Check that the people you really want to receive your information are getting it (it is people's perceptions and understanding that are critical, not what you have actually sent out!)
- Resist all impulses to become irritated and shout at journalists in a stress situation. It is always the people who are rude who lose credibility in the media.

Meanwhile, convene the crisis team to discuss the following issues:

- What is the nature of the crisis?
- Who is affected?
- What implication?
- Are there deeper and more serious problems behind it?
- Will there be other effects that emerge over time?
- What is the worst-case scenario?
- What is at stake?
- Who else is involved?
- What will the media/general public think/do/demand?
- What are the time constraints?
- Where can we get help?
- What happens after the acute stage?
- What should the focus of our information be?
- Can the emergency be limited?
- Who can influence us?
- Who else should be contacted?
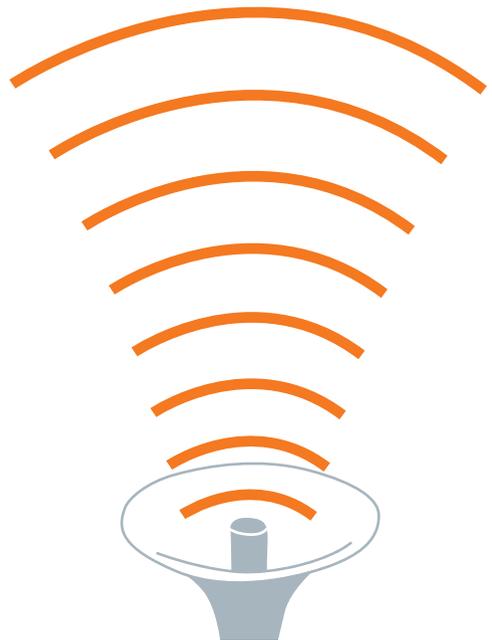
Contact the crisis management team

The person with overall responsibility for information should initiate cooperation with the in-house crisis management team.

Contact should also be made with the unit responsible for the overall crisis management team information, e.g. the Swedish Government Offices, other central authorities, county councils or municipalities.

Start the external analysis

Listen to the radio, watch TV, check incoming calls to the Information Centre, check with other authorities, gather information from employees, monitor traffic on the Internet etc.

Avoid becoming trapped in an impossible situation

The scope and nature of the crisis are often unclear not only to the general public, but to the media and authorities during the first, chaotic stage. So it is important to avoid locking up the authority's future profile or actions through overly strong and definite statements.

Do not promise more actions and measures before you have the basis for an evaluation of the crisis as a whole. Misguided ambition all too often results in authority personnel allowing themselves to be pressured early on into promising more than they are subsequently able to deliver.

This is often based on an exaggerated perception of people's expectations and on inexperience. It is also easy in an interview situation to be pressured into using exaggerated words and values to define the situation.

This misguided ambition can also lead to the authority adopting excessively strong language and measures far too early in the proceedings, with the aim of calming the population and showing that the authority has control over the sequence of events.

Information for the media

Handling an acute situation

If you must appear in front of the media before you have managed to plan it thoroughly, you can base the information you provide on the following template:

- ➤ **Summarise** quickly everything you know for sure.
- ➤ **Do not speculate about anything else.**
- ➤ **Never lie.**
- ➤ **Display a human side,** involvement and empathy.
- ➤ **Forget all thoughts of personal prestige.**
- ➤ **Comfort,** encourage and give hope, without exaggerating.
- ➤ **Describe in concrete terms** what is being done and what will be done.
- ➤ **Promise ongoing information.**

A few hints on promoting cooperation

The authorities should bear the following in mind, to ensure that contacts with the media work as well as possible:

➤ **Accredit** the media's representatives
➤ **Adapt the information activities** in line with the media's rhythm and terms.
➤ **Be proactive** in your contacts with the media.
➤ **Monitor what is said,** written and shown in the media.
➤ **Give the media good conditions** and space in which to work.

The information unit's active response

The information unit should set up a clearly indicated and marked area for the media's representatives, close to the geographical site of the crisis. An Information Officer who is kept sufficiently up-to-date that he/she constitutes a resource for journalists and photographers should be stationed there.

During the acute phase of a major crisis, it is not unusual for the media's source critical work to be forced to take a back seat to the often most pressing need to quickly convey information on what is happening. This often means that the radio and TV will be broadcasting live from the scene. The Information Officer is tasked with making it easier for the media, in cooperation with whoever is responsible for safety (the emergency services, police, armed forces, medical services), to take photographs quickly and safely, to visit the scene of the accident, and to gain access to people whom they can interview etc.
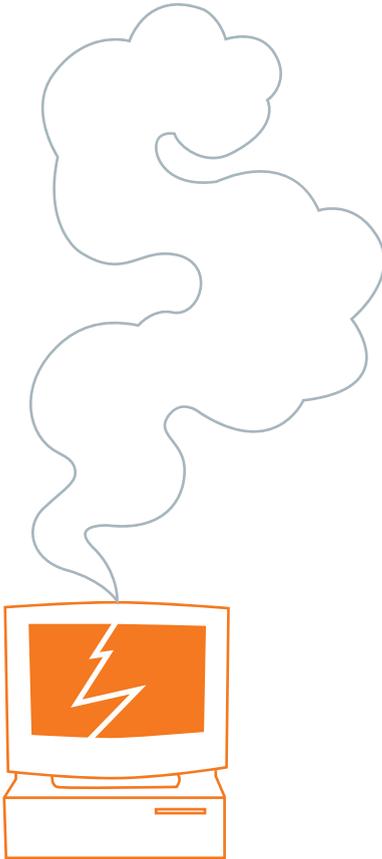
The information unit must constantly strive to keep the media as up-to-date as possible about the latest events. This is done firstly, on an ongoing basis through verbal and written information, secondly, via interviews with those responsible, and thirdly, via press releases and press conferences.

The ongoing information provision demands that the information unit has access to the latest news at all times, from not only the overall crisis management team, but from its own authority's crisis management team and from the ongoing activities. The information should then be passed to the media centre, the scene of the accident or equivalent, the information centre and the Internet.

Interviews with authority representatives

When the media ask for interviews, the authority should, wherever possible, oblige them, even during the acute phase of the crisis. If the authority does not get its version of the events and its own role across, the media will very quickly find other people willing to give their version of what is happening.

These alternative descriptions can, where deficient or inaccurate information is unfortunately provided, lead to the authorities having to allocate substantial resources to counter the rumours, half-truths, confusions etc. that have then started to circulate.

The fundamental rule is, therefore: always agree to interviews!

So who should be interviewed? The media are keen to have the most senior person responsible comment. This might be a Director General, or the crisis team leader, or the Chairman of a Board of Directors. The media also want access to people who have been actively involved in handling the crisis, e.g. the police, emergency services personnel, psychologists, doctors or financial, technical and legal experts.

The person to be interviewed should be prepared by the information unit as to how the interview will proceed and the way journalists work. The more inexperienced the interview subject is, the more training and background information will be needed.

Things to bear in mind during interviews

Before the interview takes place, the authority's representative should find out the name of the journalist, who he/she works for, and when and where the interview will be used. The interview subject should clarify their position and the role and responsibility of the authority.

Try, if possible, to create time to go through and attempt to predict every possible question, and to prepare answers to them. Journalists want details of deaths and injuries, of damage, costs, whose responsibility it is, of whether something similar has happened before, of responsibility and authority, and of what the authority is going to do to ensure it doesn't happen again etc. Make sure that you have the facts and figures at hand and draft short, concrete answers to the

questions that the media can be expected to ask.

Decide, before the interview, which points the authority most wants to convey.

It is often best to start with information on the health and well-being of people and animals, followed by the consequences for the environment, surrounding areas, property, economic aspects etc., and after those, any potential consequences for your own authority.

Assume that everything said during and in connection with the interview may be published. Do not reveal any private or confidential information.

Interviews with the broadcast media

Interviews with the broadcast media are usually very short in conjunction with the broadcast – maybe no more than 30 seconds – but they can be crucial in establishing confidence and respect for a long time to come. You should, therefore, strive to create time for preparation and training for these important occasions.

Go over the following questions carefully:
- ➤ **Which programme** is involved?
- ➤ **Who is doing the interview?**
- ➤ **Is it being broadcast live** or taped?
- ➤ **How long** will the interview last?
- ➤ **During an interview in someone's home:** think about the décor to be conveyed!
- ➤ **When will the interview be broadcast?**
- ➤ **Who else will take part** in the programme? Will it be a debate?
- ➤ **Are there any other** circumstances to be considered with regard to the actual programme, clothing etc.?
- ➤ **What questions will they ask you?**
- ➤ **How much** does the journalist know about the facts?

You may also be confronted with a microphone and camera "in your face" on the doorstep. Train yourself mentally, now and again, to handle these encounters before they happen! An interview that happens unexpectedly and when you are unprepared is difficult to handle if you haven,t considered the most important questions beforehand.

Try to practice in advance

If you have the time, you and your colleagues should go through a range of different questions that may be asked and the correct answers in each case. Write down both the questions and answers in a structured form. Go through them by yourself a few times before the interview. It's easier for your visual memory to remember something you, yourself, have written! Always try to be positive. Decide on the two or, at the most, three most important messages that you want to convey. Try at all times to be focused, concrete and concise.

Concrete advice for an interviewee:
- ➤ **During the interview,** you must be open and honest.
- ➤ **Take every question seriously.**
- ➤ **Listen to the whole question.**
- ➤ **Think before you answer.**

- ➤ **Answer the question** – and nothing more.
- ➤ **Never say more** than you know to be the case.
- ➤ **Stick to the areas in which you work and are competent.**
- ➤ **Stick to the facts** and avoid answering hypothetical questions.
- ➤ **Never speculate** on the cause of events or on the actions of other authorities.
- ➤ **Counter inaccuracies** and untruths immediately.
- ➤ **Don't answer questions** based on inaccurate or misleading assumptions.
- ➤ **Correct inaccurate assumptions** in the question before answering it.
- ➤ **Use everyday language** and avoid jargon.
- ➤ **If you are unable or unauthorized to answer,** the question – explain why.
- ➤ **Avoid saying, "no comment".**
- ➤ **Be friendly and diplomatic** and avoid getting annoyed.
- ➤ **Never argue** with the journalist.

Follow up on how the interview turned out in its published form. Does the authority need to issue additional, complementary information on matters that the journalist chose not to focus on or include? If there are any serious misapprehensions or incorrect quotes that must be dealt with, it should be done as quickly as possible while the issue is still topical. Avoid demanding corrections of minor, individual errors.

Negative and inaccurate publicity

Always demand corrections of clear factual errors. Refer, if possible, to experts in the field. Ask to talk to the journalist who has painted an "imbalanced" picture and go through how your perception differs from theirs. Don't be aggressive!

It is important to differentiate between factual matters and values, but if all the facts are presented, value differences tend to decrease. Demand that differing values are accepted and presented, impartially, as far as possible.

Interviews with those affected and next of kin

The media will always want to interview those affected and the next of kin. Make sure that the authority has sufficient insight into the situation of those affected and the next of kin during the acute phase that they can be given the support needed if they, themselves, are willing to give interviews, and that the authority will respect their wishes if they choose not to.

The information unit can be an important intermediary link in this context, e.g. by asking those affected and next of kin, on the media's behalf, if they are willing to meet the media, and by preparing the people in question for the situation they can expect to face, and providing support and advice.

It is unfortunately not uncommon for those affected and next of kin who have agreed to interviews during the acute phase to regret having done so at a later stage. This is why an in-depth and insight-ful discussion is vital before the interview – something that is, of course, often very difficult to achieve during the acute phase of a crisis. If you can see that someone is markedly affected by a sequence of events and is in shock, the authority should advise them against participating in an interview.

Call in psychological assistance if the authority is either tasked with taking care of next of kin and those affected for any length of time, or forced to do so by circumstances, and allow those providing psychological help to take part in interviews with those affected.

Although an interview can be extremely stressful for the person being interviewed, it can also be extremely valuable for the public at large. An interview during the acute phase can fulfil an explanatory role and can help with the subsequent handling of the crisis. The information unit should, therefore, actively help to promote a solution that is satisfactory for both the media and for those affected and the next of kin.

Press conferences

Regular meetings with all of the media are a must in conjunction with major crisis. The frequency and timing of these press conferences depend on the nature of the crisis, its intensity, physical dispersal etc.

The press conference is an opportunity to find out how the media see the crisis, to eliminate misunderstandings and confusion, to display empathy and to emerge

as the source of the most detailed, complete and up-to-date information on the crisis.

Before the press conference, consider who is going to take part. Only include people with a specific knowledge of the crisis or who are responsible for strategic decisions and hence able to make statements on the authority's behalf. Don't include too many people.

Choose one person in a position of responsibility and who has communication skills to chair the press conference.

Decide when the conference is to start and when it is to end. Keep control over who is admitted to the press conference.

Start the press conference with a short introductory statement during which the authority describes what has happened, how the authority has responded, what it has decided, what resources have been allocated, what will happen next, and what the authority regards as most important at that precise moment.

The floor should then be thrown open for questions. The issues involved when answering questions are, in principle, the same as those involved in an interview with an individual journalist (see previous section).

The media should be given the opportunity to obtain the information provided at the conference in written form, as diagrams, photos etc.

After the conference, there should be time for individual interviews, e.g. for tv and radio. If the people in charge do not have time to give several interviews, you can use a pooling approach, i.e. the media
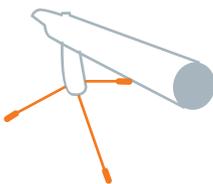
agree to let a team interview and film the person in question, with the results then handed over to all interested media. This approach should, however, be the exception, rather than the rule. Try to create the time for interviews with all the media.

Press conference

- ▶ **Do not call a press conference** if you have nothing significant to say and which must be announced quickly to a wide-ranging audience.
- ▶ **The person who will be answering** questions during the press conference should be allocated time for training and a review of potential questions.
- ▶ **Let someone other** than the person who will be answering the questions call on individual journalists during the conference.
- ▶ **Discipline during the Q & A session,** is improved by having someone go round with a microphone.

The Internet as a media channel

The vast majority of journalists use the latest information technology to search for, process and produce information. When it comes to individual authorities, it is vital to build up homepages and databases that enable the authorities, where ever possible, to facilitate the journalists, work during crisis.

The websites should be structured so that the media can access the information aimed directly at them immediately. It is important that this information is updated continuously so that those journalists

and editorial departments who want to can follow the sequence of events via the Net. The website can also include databases that give access to background information, statistics, graphics, models, statements, press releases, organisation structures, facts and figures on production and processes etc.

Press conferences and interviews, for example, can also be presented on the homepage as a valuable complementary source of information for those journalists unable to attend in person.

Journalists should also be given the opportunity to contact authorities, e.g. by requesting information, asking questions, or interviewing them.

A very quick, reactive and well-run homepage helps journalists to find much of the information they need, which in turn means that both they and the authorities can work more efficiently.

Monitor what is said, shown and written

Media monitoring should start as soon as a crisis occurs, for a number of reasons.

The media are very quick and very good at finding information. This means that the crisis management team can obtain very valuable information on the way the crisis is progressing by monitoring the media.

A crisis image affects everyone involved. And it is largely conveyed by the media. This is why it is vital at an early stage to pay attention to every aspect of the crisis scenario development, e.g. as a result of imprecise information, of important

information not getting across, of messages being misinterpreted, of rumours being spread, of authorities contradicting each other, or of attempts on the part of other actors to hinder the crisis management or discredit a particular authority, etc.

It also important to pay attention to your own authority's image. By being quick off the mark with complementary information, interviews, corrections of factual errors the authority can play an active part in creating its preferred image of its own role and activities.

What does monitoring mean?

> **That the information unit** constantly monitors what is said, written and shown in the media and on the Internet.

> **That the unit has a proactive problem-solving function** that immediately gets to grips with incorrect information, confusion, rumour spreading etc. which, in the opinion of the authority, hampers or hinders the crisis management process.

> **That the unit is tasked** with immediately informing the crisis management team of any information in the media which could affect the continued course of events.

> **That the unit generates summaries** containing overall descriptions of the media's coverage and submits it to the crisis management team, their own employees and others involved in the emergency, e.g. other authorities or voluntary organisations.

> **That the unit tapes, cuts out and documents** what is said, written and shown. This not only has an immediate value during the crisis, it is indispensable in connection with subsequent evaluation work.

Information for different groups

There are two main types of actors whom the authorities must take into account during a crisis, namely the actors defined by the authority, and those who define themselves as actors in a given context.

The first group includes the authority's own employees, other authorities and organisations, those affected and next of kin, the media and volunteers.

The second group includes all those individuals, groups, organisations, associations, temporary groupings, interested parties etc. who act more or less independently during a crisis and who come to the authorities, attention.

The information requirement for many of these groups is highly specific and the authority must be able to conduct a dialogue with them via direct channels. This increases the effectiveness of the information. The recipients receive the information they need directly without having to constantly monitor the media. And the authority can target the people requesting the information directly without having to rely on it being conveyed by the media.

The authority should, therefore, during every crisis, both designate the groups that it wants to reach, and pay attention

to and meet the information requirement of a range of spontaneous groups. In both cases, the aim must be to use channels that are as selective as possible.

Groups with special information requirements

There are a number of groups who require information via special channels and/or which is structured on the basis of these groups, preconditions.

- ➤ **Information for the visually or hearing impaired** can be conveyed using talking newspapers, text-TV or telephone voice response services, for example.
- ➤ **Some groups in society** can only be reached by information in their native languages or within the framework of a particular social or religious culture, which means that the information unit must have access to translators and interpreters.
- ➤ **During a crisis, the information unit** must also remember that there are people who are in the country on a temporary basis, e.g. tourists and conference delegates. Not only do they not speak the local language, they are also often substantially ignorant of the local situation, the structure of society's aid organisations, and where they should turn for information.
- ➤ **There are also situations** where differences in culture, religion, views on sexual equality, of people in authority etc. demand special adaptation, e.g. when choosing who provides information and when formulating that information.

The organisation's own employees

Well-informed employees are, for a number of reasons, a prerequisite of successful information management during crisis.

Well informed employees are the best salespersons of the capacity of the authority's capability of the crisis.

As representatives of the authority, the employees have the chance to explain, describe, analyse and attest to the authority's actions and information.

The contacts they have with the outside world, both as employees and as private individuals, mean that they can form part of the authority's external analysis and hence provide feedback in the form of valuable information on the way in which the emergency is developing, on the way people see the authority etc.

The employees have an automatic right to be well-informed on what their own authority is doing. Their families, health and well-being and their own futures may be at stake.

This is why the employees, families should also be taken into consideration in the context of the information work, particularly if a family member is significantly affected by the crisis.

Demands for internal information must, therefore, be met, and resources must be created accordingly.
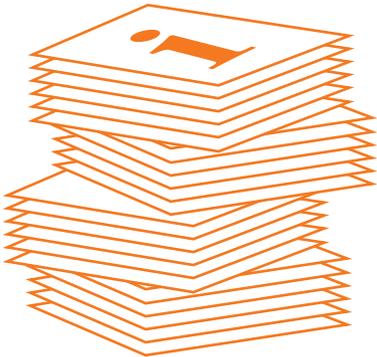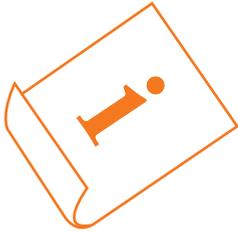
The internal information must be:
- **Fast**
- **Open**
- **Honest**
- **Detailed**
- **Easily accessible**
- **Clear**

The information should describe the role of the authority and the employees in the crisis and the crisis consequences for the authority and the employees.

By placing both the authority's and the individual's work in an overall crisis context, the internal information can help to generate a strong sense of cohesion.

The internal information must be lightening fast if the employees are not to end up in a situation they hate – finding things out via the media, acquaintances or "word of mouth". Such a situation will also, incidentally, damage the management's credibility.

Adaptation of information to different personnel groups may be necessary in larger organisations. The information issued to employees must be adapted in line with their work situation, field of competence, decision-making powers and training.

The employees may be in a variety of locations over the course of the day and with varying access to communications technology equipment. They also need different types of information, e.g. updates, source data for decisions, analyses and conclusions, preferences and suggested solutions to problems, etc.

The information unit must, therefore, create a chart showing which information is to be conveyed to different personnel groups via different channels.

Volunteers

A large number of individuals, groups and organisations often come forward as volunteers during a crisis. The authority may have cooperated with some of them and asked them for help during crisis before. Other groups emerge spontaneously, lack formal competence, are unused to working with the authority, and have no previous emergency work experience.

They may want to provide help in the form of advice and instructions, to investigate the scope and nature of the crisis, to take part in the rescue work and/or to try and coordinate activities by issuing instructions and resolving conflicts. These groups count on society's support and may come into conflict with the authorities due to a combination of a

huge desire to help and an ignorance of responsibilities, roles and authority involved.

The spontaneous desire to help should be affirmed and gratefully noted, but at the same time, a thorough assessment must precede any decision by the authority to incorporate voluntary workers into the crisis work and crisis management.

The authority must gather information on these volunteers and ensure that they are kept up-to-date with the crisis development and any need on the part of the authorities for the services they are offering.

VIPs

A crisis attracts prominent individuals. Their presence can provide moral support for the crisis work and can also be taken as an indicator of society's financial and material support. These individuals do, however, demand considerable attention and a great deal of energy on the part of personnel already under very severe pressure as a result of handling the crisis.

In a worst case scenario, this may necessitate temporarily interrupting the work to ensure both that satisfactory levels of safety are in place and that the media's requirements can be served.

The information unit must be prepared to handle vips. It is important that their visits or presence are organised in a way that supports the crisis management without taking too much time from its work.

The information unit should allocate resources that enable it to handle all the practical arrangements, meetings with the media, and any press conferences and site visits, and should also allocate a limited amount of time for consultation and meetings with the crisis management.

Crisis communication checklist

Desired conditions for crisis information

The information produced by government authorities during crisis should help to ensure that everyone actively involved in the crisis, the media and the population in general are given a picture of events that is as correct and up-to-date as possible.

Crisis information should, therefore, help to create the best possible understanding of the situation and its various consequences, so that the parties involved in the crisis and those individuals affected are best able to take decisions in the areas for which they are responsible or which affect them in some other way.

Furthermore, that part of the public sector not directly affected by events should be able to have its need for factual and updated information on the crisis fulfilled.

Being prepared

❑ Emergency awareness
❑ Organisational support base
❑ Goals
❑ Information department structure
❑ Dialogue with the outside world
❑ Credibility

Before the crisis

❑ Build personal relationships with journalists
❑ Create a natural partnership with other authorities
❑ Build up a high level of credibility
❑ Build up networks
❑ Carry out ongoing external analyses
❑ Establish an internal awareness of crisis communication
❑ Hold role-playing exercises
❑ Ensure that functioning systems are in place for dialogues with the outside world

Crisis communication kit

❑ Crisis communication must be handled professionally
❑ In a crisis, everyone becomes a decision-maker
❑ Think first!
❑ Credibility is absolutely critical.

When the crisis happens

❑ Start quickly
❑ Raise the alarm
❑ Open information channels
❑ Contact the crisis management team
❑ Announce that the authority has started work on the crisis
❑ Start the external analyses
❑ Handle the crisis and the crisis image in parallel
❑ Be flexible and prepared to improvise

The following are common during crisis

❑ Initial uncertainty about the crisis
❑ Things happening very fast
❑ Massive information flows
❑ Contradictory messages and impressions
❑ Fast, intense monitoring by the media

- Lots of new parties involved
- A requirement for flexibility and improvisation

How to establish a clear distribution of work

- The Information Director has overall responsibility
- Press Director
- A person responsible for media monitoring and analysis
- Any spokesmen
- A person responsible for contacts with next of kin/concerned citizens
- A person responsible for internal information
- A person responsible for research and gathering facts on anything and everything potentially connected to what has happened
- Linguistically skilled personnel

If a crisis occurs, personnel should be given the opportunity to call their next of kin.

Establish a strong, durable information department

- Management
- Analysis group
- Producing unit
- Media services unit
- Internal information unit
- Intra-authority coordination unit
- Documentation unit
- Multicultural service unit

After the crisis

- Wind up the information capacity slowly
- Evaluate and draw conclusions
- Convert experience gained into new plans, instructions, routines and exercises

Your notes

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