Crisis Communications Handbook

Summary and translation of the Swedish "Handbok i kriskommunikation"

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SWEDISH EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Crisis Communications Handbook

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Foreword

The art of communication is difficult. And communicating in the midst of a crisis is even more difficult than everyday interaction.

The intermediaries are many, and the risk of rumours and misunderstandings is great.

But does a crisis have to be like this?

With the right systems and procedures, your organization can keep a tight grip on communications. But only if the right expertise, procedures and roles are in place before the event.

This handbook will help you chart your course. The material is primarily intended for communicators and public information officers, but should not stop there. Communication is an integral part of any organization, and managers and emergency management coordinators will also find this information useful. If communicators find some of this material too simple, we hope you will understand the reasons why.

This handbook will help you plan, implement, monitor and evaluate your crisis communications plan. It begins with a chapter on general knowledge, and ends with an experience bank of lessons learned from previous crises.

Communication requires coordination, cooperation and a great deal of internal communication. My advice is to involve as many people as possible in your crisis communications plans. When responsibilities have been delegated, the tasks can be carried out in smaller groups. And procedures and methods should not only be documented. Practise, practise and even more practise will ensure that everyone involved can function under stress.

Helena Lindberg
Director General
Swedish Emergency Management Agency

What is a crisis?

A crisis can occur on several levels. Our definition of a crisis is...

... an event that affects the lives of many people and large parts of society.

A crisis can be triggered by floods, power cuts, gas leaks, breakdowns or radioactive fallout. It can also be caused by planned attacks like terrorism, sabotage, boycotts or hacking.

A crisis is typically fast-paced, involves many actors and requires decisions made under high stress and uncertainty. Media play a significant role, because they shape and convey the picture of a crisis.

What are crisis communications?

Our definition of crisis communications is...

...the information that is exchanged by and between public authorities, organizations, the media, affected individuals and groups before, during and after a crisis.

A crisis has three dimensions, and all of them affect crisis communications:

- the actual crisis event
- how public authorities and organizations respond to the crisis
- the picture of the crisis

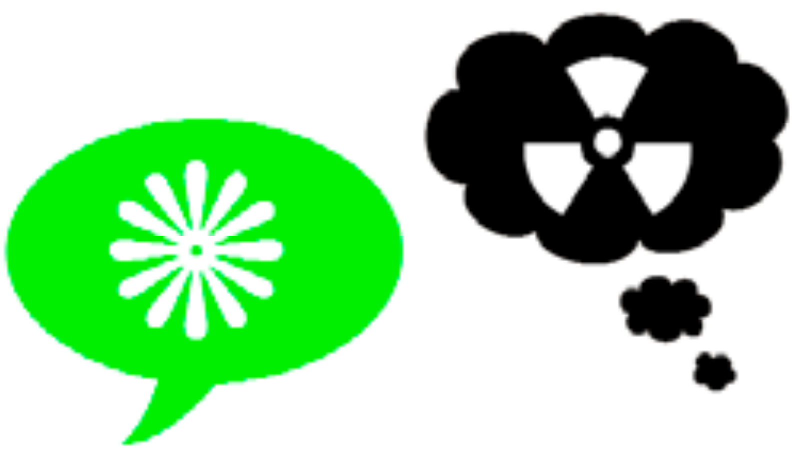
All actors involved in a crisis are also decision-makers. Your organization should find out what decision-makers can think, feel and do about different events and situations.

The truth lies with the receiver

During a crisis, decision-makers and communicators will act upon their own picture of the crisis. This is probably the most common reason why crisis communications go wrong.

Opportunities for building dialogue and confidence will diminish if your picture of the crisis is different to everyone else's.

Regardless of whether the receiver's picture of the crisis is right or wrong, this is where communication has to start. The truth lies with the receiver. When leaders and communicators address public concerns, questions and anxiety, the public will listen. Information must be based on what the public wants to know, not what authorities want to say.



Media shape the picture of the crisis

The public's picture of a crisis is largely shaped by the media. The need for information in a crisis is huge, and mass media are nearly always first and have the greatest impact. A false picture will be difficult to adjust later.

This is why communication with the media has to work from the start, and information from public authorities should be as correct and complete as possible.

Responding to the crisis and the picture of the crisis should go hand in hand.

Road accident involving a tanker truck and a bus on Crete, summer 2006. Photo: Kari Kohvakka.

Who controls the picture?

With the correct facts and figures, daily papers, radio and television are a powerful resource for both authorities and the public.

Experience from national and international crises shows that effective communication requires extensive (and perceptive) preparation. Employees may need training. Communication resources must be adequate, and communication networks must be in place before a crisis.

To control the picture, an organization must communicate a careful, comprehensible and cohesive picture of the situation. This builds confidence and creates opportunities for "setting the agenda". Another vital component is mental preparedness, which is developed before the crisis through crisis communications training.

The Östnytt team – Jael Söderlund and Linda Sandin, interview Jan Bejrum outside Police Headquarters in Visby. Photo: Karl Melander.

How to use this handbook

Crisis communications will only function if your organization has a professional communications unit before the crisis occurs. This handbook will help you develop the "everyday expertise" that is needed.

Use this handbook to plan your communications policies and procedures, train employees or simply to inspire. Learn how to handle your communications before, during and after a crisis.

You may have accomplished a great deal already, but may also have questions to develop and discuss.

At the end of the book there are check lists, references to other sources, space to jot down your ideas, to-do lists and contacts. The enclosed CD has templates to make your job easier.

The Swedish Emergency Management Agency will send you regular updates and information depending on your role. Please inform us if you change your job or your address so that we can keep your handbook up to date. And please don't hesitate to tell us how we can develop and improve the contents.

We hope this handbook gives you the support you need for your crisis response planning!

Who is our audience?

We have simplified some of the concepts in this handbook. By "public authorities" and "organizations" we mean all public administration, including county administrative boards, county councils and municipalities. The titles of "communicator" and "public information officer" are in no way fixed or closely defined, as communications professionals can hold any number of titles.

Development and learning

Effective crisis communications can largely be developed before a crisis. One method is to acquire knowledge and training. As a communicator you may be asked to organise professional development, or might decide to take the steps yourself. This training could take three different forms.

1) Mobilise the whole organization

Raise awareness across the whole organization of the need for crisis communications. Stress the importance of being involved in communication issues, regardless of job position. Compile best practices and disseminate them.

2) Train key people

Educate and train key people in crisis communications work. If specific groups in the organization are not communicators but have regular contact with the media, arrange special training for them. This usually relates to managers, but the media may also be interested in other people.

3) Prepare the communicators

Show communicators how to master their communication tools. Communication today requires good IT skills, and communicators must be able to handle their equipment effectively in crisis situations.
Communication channels include SMS and MMS messages, video technology, web publications, internet search engines and email. Arrange regular reviews and updates for personnel. This will also provide opportunities for getting to know each other.

The military, rescue services and police took part in a rescue exercise at Karholmen, Torslanda, with a chemical terrorism theme. Lillian Baxter has been infected by chemical weapons and is decontaminated by rescue personnel. Photo: Björn Larsson Rosvall.

Organizing crisis communications training and exercises

If the organization implements emergency management and chain of command exercises, these should ideally incorporate **communication issues**. Contact the person responsible for the exercises in your organization and discuss how this can take form and what resources are needed.

You can also arrange **critical incident exercises** with employees and the people responsible for emergency management to train communication channels and information flows.

Practise and train the **crisis communications** chain of command regularly, not only communicators. Don't forget to test the different channels of communication: between public authorities, between public authorities and the public, between public authorities and the media.

Exercises

Exercises require prior planning, organization and imagination. Emergency managers must be prepared for a crisis, and anticipate both existing communication needs and the needs that may arise. Good cooperation is also required because an organization that sends conflicting messages will be accountable to both the media and the public.

Media

Both the media and the public can take part in exercises. This will make the challenges more realistic and increase pressure on the participants. Role-playing journalists could use different methods to report on the participants and other role players – victims, relatives and the general public.

A fire at the new fire training centre in Löddeköpinge. No one knows how the fire started, but there was no training that day according to fire brigade personnel. An electrical fault may be the cause. Photo: Patrick Persson.

Either real freelance journalists or people with journalistic experience can play the media. Another option would be to use journalism students.

Journalism colleges and secondary schools are often willing to take part in exercises. Role playing mass media representatives can take part in mock interviews, press conferences, press meetings, etc.

There is often a need – and a desire – to train key people during the exercise. But media training is not usually appropriate in this setting. Interview techniques and camera work should be trained with other experts and consultants in an environment that enables more personal feedback and training.

The public

Training communication with the general public should be as realistic as possible.

A number of people could be engaged to monitor the information presented by role-playing mass media and the information communicated by participants, via websites for example. If possible, the "public" can also be interviewed by the media.

The "public" could then be asked to react to information from public authorities and the media during the exercise, and contact public authorities with questions about the events. They can role-play victims, anxious relatives, personnel or any other individuals affected by the events that take place. They can also provide eyewitness accounts or other important information.

No previous knowledge is required to play the public. If the organization does not use its own employees – or employees from the other groups taking part – students, pensioners and drama students could be asked to volunteer.

Methods and channels

Depending on the objectives of the exercise and the scenario, the role playing media and public can use different channels during (and even before) the exercise. This could be a technical system that needs to be tested, or different forms of cooperation and networks.

A disaster response exercise “Havsörn” (Sea Eagle) at Forsmark Nuclear Power Plant. Police Officer Benny Bengtsson gives instructions to Ulf Henricsson and Head of the Swedish Police National Criminal Investigation, Lars Nylén. Photo: Rolf Hamilton.

Web newspaper

Information is communicated to participants via a web newspaper that would actually be published during a real crisis. Journalists are needed to work on the web newspaper, and the newspaper should be easily accessible to participants. The journalists could interview participants by telephone.

Mock press conferences

Mock press conferences can be arranged to increase pressure on participants. The purpose is to plan meetings with large numbers of journalists at the same time and present coordinated information. Media and journalism students could role-play journalists at these press conferences. Alternatively, freelance journalists could be hired. Press conferences and media activities should be coordinated by the exercise command team. If large numbers of people are involved in the exercise, rooms and times should be reserved well in advance, and all practical details surrounding the mock press conferences and cooperation meetings should be handled. Reports from each press conference are sent to the liaison person in the exercise command team to enable rapid reconciliation and offer advice to role-playing journalists if necessary.

Radio/Television

Radio stations and television channels sometimes take part in exercises to train their own emergency management procedures.

Radio stations and television channels can be contacted and invited to take part in the exercise. Experienced reporters can bring their own technical equipment and be responsible for news reporting during the exercise.

A team of role-playing television reporters can monitor officials in the organizations that take part in the exercise. The television team can also cover mock press conferences. Television and radio features (interviews and edited press conferences) should be sent to participants over the internet during the exercise.

The Emergency Management Unit in Region Västra Götaland held a press meeting to present the results of their response so far to the tsunami disaster in Asia. The liaison centre is open 24 hours per day during emergencies. Photo: Björn Larsson Rosvall.

Training

Try to find out what your organization needs, what you need to work on and who needs training. You can then organize 4-hour or 2-day training courses with different features, such as:

- Seminar or lecture with the organization's emergency manager, who understands the significance of communication during crises.

- Seminar or lecture with the organization's communications officer or similar who has crisis experience, preferably from a recent example that everyone knows about. Inviting someone from another organization would provide a new dimension, but using someone from your organization would also work. A major event that everyone knows about but has not studied "from the inside" would be suitable.

- Arrange practical media training courses – interview training with cameras – for managers and other representatives. Some people are afraid of being interviewed on television, which could be the reason why managers and other leaders don't want to speak to media. You probably know who they are. Set aside 4 hours or one day for media training. Media consultants can train individuals or groups, although people who are nervous might prefer to practise in front of someone they do not know rather than a colleague.

- Exercises in horizon scanning during major events – events that do not affect your organization, but can provide good practice.

- SEMA also arranges training courses in crisis communications at different levels.

  Contact www.krisberedskapsmyndigheten.se

Research and Studies

Study how others organizations communicate in a crisis and how you would like your own organization to communicate (or not communicate!). The Swedish Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) has conducted several studies into crisis communications during different types of events.

The demand for information during crises is always acute. Research is carried out as part of media/communication and journalism studies. SEMA sponsors studies on how society communicates during crises, both in Sweden and internationally.

Research shows that 60 to 80 percent of crisis communications work involves information. This is why studies and research are so important. Investigating and establishing the background to a crisis, and how municipalities, county councils, public authorities and organizations respond is important. A picture or an idea can come to represent a crisis, while the huge flow of information that forms the backbone is often overshadowed by more dramatic events. SEMA commissions researchers at major universities to study different types of crises. These studies include analysing media coverage, evaluating public confidence in the government and political leaders through opinion polls, or examining the internal and external communication of various actors during coordinated campaigns by public authorities.

Media are often accused of running in packs during a crisis and not challenging the prevailing climate of opinion. This is why a study of media coverage during the tsunami disaster, for example, is so important. The study shows how major Swedish media companies did in fact maintain their own focus and work methods in their crisis coverage. The aim is that public authorities can see how media portray a crisis from previous events. There are obvious similarities in how these events are covered, but the general aim is that municipalities, county councils and government agencies can learn from this coverage.

Studies that focus primarily on investigating an event can later provide data for research. This approach has progressively been transformed into a methodology for crisis communications. Study and research form the basis of crisis communications, and provide a platform for the methodology and training courses produced by SEMA.

Crises are often aggravated by inadequate information or conflicting messages from actors. This affects public confidence and undermines opportunities for public authorities to convey their message.

Communication has played a vital role in emergency management during several crises in Sweden. These include the Estonia ferry disaster, the tsunami disaster, the Gothenburg disco fire, the Gudrun storm and avian influenza.

In each of these examples, the responsible people are put to the test and their credibility is fundamental. Similarly, an effective and credible crisis communications methodology is based on studies and research in the field.

Information warfare poses a new and significant threat to Sweden. The Swedish Defence Wargaming Centre is already training for the new IT war. Our former enemy, Igor, is pictured. Photo: Fredrik Funck.

The Fundamentals of Crisis Communications

What are crisis communications

"The information that is exchanged by and between public authorities, organizations, the media, affected individuals and groups before, during and after a crisis."

Effective communication during a crisis requires a good ability to communicate before, during and after the crisis.

Communication between the public, the media and public authorities is ultimately based on confidence in democracy. Communication has to flow between these three groups in both directions. Effective crisis communications also includes the capacity to identify different target groups and adapt communication. In the relationship between the public and public authorities, public authorities have to understand the value of communicating with the public in a crisis, be able to gather and use information from the public, and provide information. If authorities do not want to give or receive information, if they appear closed rather than open, public confidence will plummet and communication will be difficult. If public authorities are perceived as inaccessible, the public will feel less inclined to offer any information that supports their crisis response.

Crisis communications by and between public authorities requires coordination and cooperation between authorities, organizations and businesses, but also the ability to inform and seek information.

Smashed shop window after Reclaim the Street vandalism.
Erika Malmgren from Gina Tricot behind the broken window.
Photo: Lars Epstein.

Effective internal crisis communications also require perception: the ability to make assessments, to understand the present situation, to explain and convey information, to predict future needs, to anticipate who will be affected and be able to inform them. Above all, effective crisis communications rely on the ability to gather and analyse information, and communicate decisions and measures.

One important condition for effective communication by public authorities is knowing how the media work before, during and after a crisis. Understanding the role of the media, the working conditions of individual journalists, and the role of the media during crises.

Rapid technological developments have increased opportunities for individuals to communicate directly with the media and spread their own messages. There is a risk that public authorities see how this phenomenon benefits the media while affecting them negatively. Public authorities should account for this trend in their emergency management plans and take steps to influence and utilize the situation, with the public as the target group and crisis communications as their means. Public authorities should also develop their knowledge of how the public reacts, how to communicate before and during a crisis, and how people in crisis communicate – especially with the media – in real time.

Why crisis communications?

Communication affects the development of events and shapes the crisis response. Crisis communications must therefore be considered an integral part of emergency management; a core function. The public expect public authorities to communicate before, during and after a crisis and inadequate communication has always aggravated crises and led to lack of confidence in public authorities and democratic processes. Training and exercises can improve this capacity, but the responsible actors must individually decide – depending on the type of crisis, their organization and resources – how their operative crisis communications will be organised and run.

Demonstrators at Medborgarplatsen in Stockholm. Photo: Stefan Söderström.

Crisis response and crisis communications are not exact sciences. The factors that determine success are often intuition, personal knowledge and experience, flexibility and imagination and an ability to combine all of these factors with established principles and lessons. SEMA's goal is therefore to be a knowledge centre, a meeting point where crisis communications experience and lessons are collected, analysed, validated and then transformed into knowledge, methods and training. Each individual is then responsible for integrating this knowledge into the crisis response strategies of their own organization based on the conditions of their organization and the nature of the crisis.

The crisis, crisis response and picture of the crisis

Anyone who responds to a crisis must understand how people base their views of the crisis and the response on the picture they receive of the crisis. This picture can come from different directions, depending on the stage of the crisis, and the media are often important conveyers for those who are not directly involved. Crisis professionals should understand that people's views of a crisis are important, no matter how far they are from the truth. People's picture of the crisis will influence their views, and their confidence in social institutions and your organization.

Credibility

By always striving to be open, honest and competent, your organization will maintain a high level of credibility at all times. An organization with genuine credibility is more likely to succeed in its efforts to communicate and convey messages.

The biggest job – laying the groundwork for credibility – takes place before the crisis occurs.

Credibility is based on stable relations, and creating good relations with the media, your partners and the general public will help you develop effective crisis communications. This applies for both communication professionals and managers. These relations will also say how other people see your organization.

Transparency

The most important – and difficult – concept when responding to a crisis is "transparency". The public's willingness to trust and follow an authority's instructions during a crisis is based on that authority's credibility. A closed organization generates suspicions of bad management, incompetence, etc. But this is a complex area, because the whole picture does not usually emerge until much later. Information can be unreliable during the early stages, and authorities do not want to sound uncertain or unknowing.

Rescue workers examine a plastic container after a probable gas emission on the Finland ferry Cinderella at Stadsgårdskajen in Stockholm on Sunday, May 21, 2006. Photo: Krister Larsson.

Transparency applies towards the media, the public and other authorities. Transparency is a prerequisite for effective cooperation between actors in a crisis.

You must also be clear and open even when you cannot explain or say why. Explaining that secrecy is based on considerations for privacy is often respected, if not by the media at least by the public. The principle of public access to official records applies in a crisis. The Administrative Procedure Act on the obligations of administrative authorities towards the general public also applies.

Accessibility

Creating systems for dialogue promotes accessibility – for both the public and media. These encompass expertise, technology, systems, relations and procedures. An authority's channels must be in place before a crisis: technology, website, telephone numbers and procedures for maintaining contact with the media and handling the questions they ask.

Employees must be open and accustomed to handling the media. This applies specifically for communicators but also for other employees. The management should also consider dialogue as an integral part of their role – even in difficult situations.

Expertise

Expertise provides a basis for credibility – a hard-working organization, an organizational culture that values expertise, and media relations characterised by professionalism and respect for individual journalists. This applies for managers, communicators and any other representatives of the organization.

Transparency also means that you can admit and explain why some information cannot be divulged, which is another sign of expertise – a strategic choice based on knowledge and experience.

Understanding

Organizations and individual employees that show understanding will influence how the public perceives a crisis and the people who respond. Effective crisis response is based on understanding and sympathy for the victims.

You may not otherwise know what measures are needed. One important point to remember – no matter what type of organization you represent – is that lives and health are always more important than material damage or loss of property.

Understanding people who want or demand information is also important, even when you cannot give them the information they require. Should everyone be treated equally – or can you understand why some people feel badly treated? These issues may also arise when working with other crisis response actors or in media relations.

The murder of 5-year-old Sabina in Arvika on 11 September, 2003. A drawing for Sabina. Photo: Torbjörn Andersson.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Communication and cooperation

Cooperation

A crisis means that many different authorities and organizations will have to work together to solve the situation. The same applies for communication. This is positive, of course, and a prerequisite for building public confidence in an organization's capacity to handle the crisis, but this could also be a matter of life and death if the situation concerns medical advice or instructions for handling toxic substances. Conflicting information from organizations in this context is unacceptable. And also the reason why cooperation around sending common messages is prioritised in crisis response today.

An effective method is to develop everyday cooperation before a crisis. Create networks with other communicators and emergency managers in similar public authorities and organizations. "Similar" in this context means organizations that are geographically and professionally similar. In a crisis, it is easier to work with people you know, or at least have met before.

Effective crisis communications also means thinking broadly – anticipating who will be affected by the crisis and informing them. If several people from a command organization, from different organizations, are going to take part in a press conference, they should meet beforehand to prepare themselves.

Rapidly establishing text message contact or email groups, or communication in any other way, should be second nature for communications officers. As well as anticipating the consequences of various decisions for other actors and knowing when to contact them. Messages that are intended to create a reaction or a certain type of behaviour are much more powerful when they are sent by several actors in the same way.

Another important element of cooperation is communication between public authorities and the general public, and other target groups in the crisis response system.

Some examples:

- Groups with special needs
- Family members
- Employees and their families
- Volunteers
- Employers
- International contacts

No matter what groups are involved, channels must be rapidly established for maintaining contact. Try to use the channels that already exist. Your organization's approach should be that even though these groups may need support, they can also contribute to the response. "Target groups" can be a valuable resource.

A crack in the earth caused the collapse of eight houses on Påskvägen in Vagnhärad. Photo: Pressens Bild.

The contents of communication

What does the public want to know? What can the public tell you?

Who is your audience? The media is a means for reaching the public, but the public is not an anonymous mass. They are victims, families, witnesses, volunteers, perpetrators, politicians, employees. Formulate a message that serves your purpose. What reactions, protective measures, transportation or evacuations do you want to achieve? Or do you want to instil seriousness, stability or reassurance?

When you prepare your information plan, work out a message based on the three most important questions that you will have to answer. For example: What are you, your department or organization, doing right now? What are the issues, and how do you intend to address them? These are the questions that journalists will ask, and the information that people will have a right to know. Say what you think is most important first. This is vital in a live broadcast. Do not worry about repeating yourself.

Try to understand your target groups and their need for information. People want to know how they should think and act right now. What are the consequences for me and my family? How can I find out more? Questions will arise later on about what happened and why, about who is responsible and whether compensation or damages are due.

Think about the formulation of your message. Speak to your colleagues and agree on key words and phrases. Expressing yourself clearly is vital in a crisis, with no risk of misinterpretation. Write your ideas down on paper and stick to them! Especially for difficult questions. The media can pick up expressions used by public figures. What words should we use to describe various people, groups or events?

Knowing that the work group has agreed on how and what information will be communicated will help you respond to journalists' questions. This applies for all contact with journalists, writing and sending press releases, who answers what questions and how, visits and guided tours, how these are planned and who will represent your organization.

You should also think about the information that target groups can provide in this context. How should you formulate your message and how should you convey it? Do you want skill descriptions for the individuals who have offered to help you find the right people? Or do you need descriptions of missing people to help in the identification of victims? Do you need tips from the general public about suspected perpetrators? Your organization must be able to listen. What can the public tell you? What does the public want to know?

How your organization acts in different communication situations will affect the public's confidence and their willingness to help.

Organization

Awareness and knowledge before a crisis will help you mobilise your crisis communications team during a crisis. Crisis response actors must understand the significance of communication during a crisis. They must be able to identify communication needs when a crisis is at hand and build up a communications team, like any other facet of crisis response. Every municipality, county administrative board, county council and government agency should have at least one full-time, professional communicator who works with these issues in the organization. The communicator should be trusted by the crisis response team, preferably be a member of the team and also take an active part in regional communication networks. The person who is responsible for communication should also be authorized to reinforce the communications unit with other designated and specially trained people. All of this should be implemented during the planning stage when the organization draws up and validates a crisis communications plan that outlines mandates, authorities and tasks.

Communications officer

The person responsible for communications should preferably be part of the crisis response team. This person should have some form of mandate such as convening personnel, making decisions about information that is published on the web and staffing different units in the organization. The role should also involve supervisory responsibilities for communications personnel, such as disseminating tasks, schedules, working hours, etc. During a crisis, a communications unit often works like a newsroom, and one person should be assigned to coordinate the effort. Personnel issues are also important. Someone has to ensure that personnel get food, rest and if necessary, crisis support.

Channel responsibilities

No two crises are alike and all communication has to be adapted to the crisis at hand. Some of the most common channels are the website, email, telephone, media or meetings. But all crises demand flexibility and imagination and you will probably discover and use other channels. Someone must always be available to handle the most common formats. Is there always someone at work who can publish information on the website? Are there always personnel who can staff the switchboard or information centre?

Centre for victims/families

Media attention and the need for information at crises centres is usually intense. This pressure has to be handled so that victims can receive the support and information they need, and so that media personnel who arrive on the site receive the information they need. At the same time, people in shock require special consideration. Set up a private and secluded place where victims and their families can meet. Specific personnel should be assigned to handle the media so that victims can avoid any unwanted attention.

Internal information

People with access to regularly updated information can inform others. Remember that personnel not working directly with the crisis will also want and need information.

Liaison officers

The communications manager – and strategist – should not have to deal with too many detailed, practical tasks. This creates a need for liaison officers from different units and a communications headquarters.

Horizon scanning and analysis

In this era of media and fast flowing information, active horizon scanning is also needed during a crisis to identify any new or changing risks. A misleading rumour may emerge from a credible source, or a debate may focus on a completely new angle. International media are often overlooked in horizon scanning even though they are a primary source of information for many people. Horizon scanning should help a communicator anticipate different issues, analyse, propose measures and present them to the crisis response team.

Documentation

Good documentation is important from both a legal perspective and to keep track of what has been said. From a communication perspective, knowing what has been said and what answers have been given during press conferences is important.

Observer

An independent observer can conduct an evaluation and review of your unit. A "non-operative" resource can also be valuable during a crisis, someone not directly involved in the crisis who can offer advice and assistance. This person could also give feedback and help evaluate the process after the event.

Media relations

News media are the most important and fastest means of reaching people in crisis. And usually the fastest way to reach personnel. Servicing the media is therefore an important part of the communications process.

One of the weakest links in crisis response often appears within the first few hours. Having the wrong information, perception or approach in the early stages can determine how the situation is handled. The ability to respond quickly is vital – to interpret the seriousness and scope of the crisis. This is always difficult because information during the initial stages is unreliable. But mobilisation can be prepared in advance by establishing clear warning systems, warning routes and contacts.

If the organization has some form of after-hours media or communications unit, the first indications of a crisis may appear here. The management might also decide to mobilise the media unit first, to see how the situation develops. This chapter deals with the factors that affect a media unit during a crisis.

Konstantin Titov meets the press after the suspension of his governorship was declared invalid by the Supreme Court.
Photo: Alexei Maishev.

A new media landscape

The media landscape has changed dramatically over the past ten years. News and media are now more accessible and we consume them differently. We can read "evening papers" on the internet and watch the morning news on television. Free newspapers are handed out on the streets and we can read the morning paper at work. Breaking news alerts are sent direct to our mobile phones.

But more information via online newspapers, free newspapers and television leads to greater competition and pressure. The question is whether greater speed, variety and pressure have affected quality? The answer is not categorically negative. Pressure increases the risk for blunders, errors and miscalculations, but opportunities for the public to access important information have dramatically improved.

Tommy Suharto's defence lawyer is chased by photographers after his client failed to appear in court to hear his judgement. October 2, 2000 in Jakarta. Photo: Edward Wray.

Fast information to the media

Pressure on authorities and decision-makers has increased, as well as the need for fast and accurate information. The timeframe for authorities to inform the public and confront the media has decreased. Opportunities for public servants to lie and cheat have also decreased.

In a crisis, media efforts **will initially focus on establishing what has happened**. Time is short, and anyone with something to say will attract media attention. The media works hard to find eyewitnesses. Telephone numbers are set up for news tips, and readers/watchers/listeners can call, email or send their photos and videos of breaking news. The media has access to any number of "roaming reporters" wherever events unfold. A public authority can no longer withhold information until the whole picture emerges. The "whole picture" will not be revealed until much later and by that time others will have told their story. A public authority can only benefit from saying what it knows, what it intends to do, and announce where and when the next update will be available.

The next phase will focus on **in-depth information**. Journalists produce background material, facts, graphics, statistics, pictures, and compare other similar events.

The final phase is often remembered longest by authorities: **the evaluation phase**. Efforts to find out what really happened, why it happened and not least, who is accountable. This is a normal process in all crises and an important task for the media. The public is also interested in this information, both victims and others. The people who are responsible will never avoid this phase, but the outcome will depend on how communication was handled during the first two phases. If transparency and willingness to communicate have led the way, even during the less successful parts of the crisis, the evaluation phase will be easier and the need for scapegoats will be less acute.

Identify information sites

Knowing how media work is vital. In a crisis, you should appoint a meeting place for journalists and consider the need for having communicators on site. Travelling to the scene of an accident is relatively easy, but there may be other situations. This should be accounted for, and preferably before it causes communication problems. Other locations could be terminals, waiting rooms, meeting places, head offices or any other place where relatives or victims can gather. You should be prepared for your role as an official representative and to provide the information that people want and need.

An official representative should also be present when journalists meet in order to answer their questions. This person should have direct contact with the crisis response team and be able to give up-to-date information.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier meets the press after Germany's decision to send troops to Lebanon on a UN peacekeeping mission. August 18, 2006 in Berlin. Photo: Gero Breloer.


ORF

Interviews

Contact with the media usually takes place by telephone – either personal interviews, providing information or responding to requests for interviews with other people in the organization. The person who handles media contact must understand his or her role – spokesperson or press secretary. Whichever role, the following questions should be answered before every interview:

Why? – Why should we agree to the interview?

Who? – Who should speak, a spokesperson or a top manager?

What? – What should we say, what will our message be?

Who? – Who is our target audience? Who do we want to reach? Newspaper? Radio? Television? Live to air, or taped? Will other people take part in the interview – victims or their families?

The situation is obviously more urgent in a crisis, but you should still request around 15 minutes before agreeing to an interview. That will give you time to consider the questions above and, if you are being interviewed, to formulate your key points.

Angela Merkel during a hasty press conference after she was overwhelmingly re-elected as party leader. September 20, 2005 in Berlin. Photo: Wolfgang Kumm.

Media tips.
Always:

- Take your time
- Think before you answer
- Stay within your field of competence
- Say that you cannot, or are not permitted, to answer a question
- Stick to the facts
- Assume that everything is “on the record”
- Be firm, fair and honest

You should also consider whether you or your organization should in fact be answering the questions. The message may need to be coordinated with other crisis responders (see Coordination).

Media tips.
Never:

- Lie, guess or present your own theories
- Become upset or angry
- Let the situation or the reporter affect you
- Use jargon
- Discuss classified information
- Say "No comment"
- Speak about issues outside your field of competence

See every interview as an opportunity to become more confident and clear, or whatever you need to improve upon. All interview situations will improve relations with the journalists who cover the issues handled by your organization.

Press releases

The same questions can be asked before issuing a press release.

1. Why communicate through a press release?
   To heighten interest, or announce important information?
   Who should the sender be?
   Should we send the release together with our partners and formulate a joint message?

2. What is our message?
   Do we want to provoke some kind of action or response and if so, from whom?
   What tone should we use, how serious is the situation.

3. Who should we send the release to?
   What media outlets: local, national, international?
   Trade press, specialty magazines or specific reporters.

A press release should never be longer than one A4 page. Your organization should have a mailing list with fax numbers and email addresses for the relevant media outlets. The text should also be published on the intranet with the name and telephone number of the person who is responsible for the press release. This person should be accessible by mobile phone for at least 24 hours after the message has been released.

Press conference

A press conference is both an opportunity and a risk. The dramaturgy is often created by the media themselves, and can provide enough material for a separate chapter.

You, your organization and any partners must be very clear about the message you want to deliver before the press conference. Do you want to announce important information or send a specific message? Do you want to spread calm or caution?

You should be very clear about who contributes and why, and who participates. The press conference should be led by a moderator or press secretary who welcomes participants, introduces the speakers, chairs the meeting and calls for questions. You should also be very clear about who leads the speakers, and decides who answers certain questions if uncertainties arise.

Anna Berger Kettner, chairperson of Stockholm Transport (SL) at an extraordinary board meeting to discuss the resignation of managing director Gunnar Schön following a business trip with his wife. May 9, 2003 in Stockholm. Photo: Jan E Carlsson.

Your key message should be very clear. The communicator or primary spokesperson is usually responsible for gathering participants beforehand and deciding how you will respond. He/she should also anticipate any difficult questions and suggest how they should be answered, and by whom.

Who to invite?

You should prepare a targeted list of media sources; the local or national media outlets that you and your organization usually deal with, and any special or international media that may be interested. Formulate a polite press release that invites (not orders) them to attend. Fax or email is fastest in an urgent situation. In an emergency, you can send material to the Swedish Central News Agency (TT) – call them if necessary – and they will coordinate the information.

Dress

Participants should also think about how they dress for a press conference. Checks and pin-stripes are not suitable because the colours become distorted on television, but the way you dress will send a message. Do participants wear a uniform at work? Should they wear their uniforms at the press conference? What impression do you want to create? Formal or relaxed? Professional or friendly? Serious or reassuring? Will operational or strategic level personnel take part? You can also invite a range of participants. If you want to show that several organizations are working together, police and medical professionals for example, they could all wear their respective uniforms.

Planning specifics

There are many practical details. You should plan in advance, and be prepared for a crisis.

What room will you use? It should be easily accessible and close to reception. There should also be adjacent rooms for interviews after the press conference.

The room should be equipped with good lighting, microphones, visual aids, electrical outlets, broadband (for simulcasts, etc). When you decide to hold a press conference, make a checklist for the people who set up the room.

Press conference checklist

- Print out all press material (description of participants and any other contact people with correctly spelt names and titles, and telephone numbers)
- Name badges for participants
- What does the background look like?
- Water, plastic cups
- Notepads, pens on the podium

Difficult questions

Information presented by the media can reassure the public and spread confidence. But a difficult situation can arise when information is sensitive or confidential.

Journalists can resort to methods that are designed to weaken you and your colleagues, and make you disclose sensitive details.

If you are polite and service-minded, which public officials should always be, you will probably want to answer their questions. But don't fall into this trap! Say "We cannot answer that question at present" or something similar, and explain why you cannot answer.

Another method used by journalists is to ask the same question in a variety of ways until they get an answer. There is a risk that you will give them too much information, just to be polite. It is okay to repeat your answer, i.e. whatever you have decided on beforehand.

In a high-pressure press conference environment, reporters may demand information because they have come to a press conference. But public authorities must communicate on their own terms and not bow to media pressure. The work group and the communicator should agree on a strategy for handling communication and stick to it!

Leaks and inappropriate comments can often be avoided if the manager shows that he or she has a communication plan. "Leaks" are often caused by inexperience or lack of planning, procedures or guidance. They can also be avoided by discussing communication in the areas that you expect media to focus on, and explaining to personnel why good media relations are so important.

Personnel who deal with journalists should see them as an asset, an opportunity to broadly deliver important information. In a worst-case scenario when lives are at stake, journalists can also be a valuable resource.

There is always a risk that journalists will try to interview people in shock.

If you and your colleagues want to protect people in shock, speak to the journalists and explain why some people should not be placed in front of a TV camera.

Tips

- Inform journalists about your organization; invite them to press meetings, lectures, seminars.
- Create good everyday media relations with the media – both communicators and managers.
- Implement daily horizon scanning:
  "What do people think about us right now?"

In a crisis:

- Appoint a press officer and decide on his/her mandate, spread his/her name and phone number throughout the organization.
- The management should formulate a communication policy and maintain regular contact with the press officer.
- Schedule information meetings with the media and keep them.
- Appoint an independent observer/horizon scanner.
- Top management must also be available for the media, at least once a day.

Communicating with people in a crisis

Preface

In this section, I will describe communication with individuals and groups who are severely affected by a crisis event. The information is based on crisis communications research, my own experience and the work carried out by the Swedish Coordination Council for People Affected by the Tsunami Disaster (RSOS).

Birgitta Darrell

Coordinating communication efforts

During and after a major event, communication with victims must be coordinated. All crises involve a large number of actors. Coordinating communication can involve working to promote effective communication between public authorities, family members and survivors while simultaneously maintaining close contact with insurance companies, voluntary organizations and religious groups. There are good grounds for analysing what this coordination implies. Because of the way Swedish public administration is organized, an individual government agency cannot order other agencies to take measures or coordinate actions unless this is specifically regulated by law. No individual authority can direct the actions of another authority because of a particular event. Authorities can endeavour to achieve coordination through public information campaigns or other efforts, however.

Five thousand paper lanterns fill the sky in Khao Lak at a remembrance ceremony for tsunami victims. Photo: Adrees Latif.

An organization that is set up urgently to provide support for victims of a crisis needs to make important decisions from the start. Verifying how these decisions are made and who is authorised to make them should take place as soon as possible. This regulates the decision-making structure and creates clarity for the people working in the organization.

Expertise

An organization that provides support to victims and their families and promotes coordination requires a vast array of expertise – lawyers, investigators and other experts. A relatively large part of this work will involve communicating with authorities. As a result, people working in the organization should have in-depth knowledge of government systems in order to meet the needs of those affected. The most common task is usually conveying information between victims and their families, and public authorities and other organizations. Crisis communication skills are important because the organization must know and understand how communication functions best in a crisis. Some personnel should also have behavioural science training. This expertise is needed to provide behaviour-based support for victims and their families, and support for personnel.

Many different needs – goals and target groups

When supporting victims and their families, you must work proactively. You have to be flexible and innovative, and anticipate the scenarios and events that victims may have to face. You have to base your long term-plans on a comprehensive analysis of the target group. A careful analysis of the target group will help you deliver the right message and information via the most appropriate channels. You may also need to identify certain individuals and groups for specific purposes.

As soon as the event has been identified and analysed, set realistic goals for your work. Define both behavioural and communication goals at an early stage. A behavioural goal is when target groups or stakeholders have to do something that they would not normally do. This could involve contacting someone to obtain information, visiting a website or encouraging victims to contact the organization. A communication goal, which is obviously steered by behavioural goals, aims to change receivers' views of the world by influencing their attitudes, knowledge, norms, involvement and intentions. This could involve increasing their willingness to contact authorities, raising their knowledge of where to seek psychosocial support, being prepared to ask for psychiatric help or whatever the actual person believes is important or unimportant.

The goals should be written down and understood because this will be more effective, and show how even more channels are available for reaching your objectives.

Students and police gather at Bromma Upper Secondary School after a 16-year-old was shot dead at the school. Photo: Anders Gustafsson.

Reaching victims – your message

Formulating messages is a delicate task – and probably the most difficult task during the whole process. Messages should be adapted to the target group and the channels that are available, and account for any factors that will prevent the target group from interpreting the message. Communicating with individuals and groups in crisis is difficult. You must adapt your information to the seriousness of their situation, and their capacity for receiving messages.

How you formulate a message depends on the purpose of your communication, i.e. whether you want to present new facts, or change attitudes or behaviour. Whatever your purpose, try to remember some key factors:

Simplicity. Keep your message simple. Avoid technical, scientific and bureaucratic terms wherever possible and leave out any information that is not relevant for the target group.

Consequence. Actors often disagree on what should be communicated and what individuals should do. Try to avoid this conflict in your message because it will only create confusion. Clarity should be your overall goal when trying to reach people in crisis.

Key point. Make your key point clear – do not bury your point in less important information. Present your key point first. Consider the people who are not capable of reading the whole text.

Tone. Your tone can be positive or negative. Whatever style you choose will determine whether your audience follows your advice and instructions.

Credibility. The person presenting the message must be credible, and the message must be clear and convincing.

Needs of the target group. In a world of information overload, your message has to reach your target group; they have to understand its significance. Your message should tell receivers what they want to know, not what the sender wants to say.

Communication cannot wait until you "finish thinking", because the target group might feel deceived. Lay your cards on the table: say what you are doing, what considerations have to be made, and so on.

The target group will feel involved. And be prepared to change your tactics if you discover that the target group does not trust the sender or feel sufficiently informed. Horizon scanning and contact with victims will help you identify these problems. The importance of feedback on communication initiatives cannot be stressed highly enough.

You should also be aware that other senders will be trying to reach the victims. To avoid conflicting information, analyse these developments and carefully review their sources. This will minimise suspicion and speculation. Silence breeds speculation. Your message should be **"We don't know what is happening but as soon as we do, you'll be the first to know."**

The "sender" can be the person who formulates a message, or the person who delivers the message. Having the right sender is vital for both your goal and the target group. If you choose the wrong sender for a specific group of people, you could create a negative effect, where the value lies in not following the sender's advice and instructions.

Communicating with the target group – reaching them and informing the right people – is central. If you do not have a clear picture of who the target group is, communicating with them will be difficult. A valuable experience from the tsunami disaster is that victims and their families would have liked to see a letter or some kind of communication from someone in the public sector immediately after the disaster.

Law firm Gernandt & Danielsson pays tribute to Thomas Ander who died in the tsunami disaster. Photo: Ingvar Karmhed.


NK

Different channels

Before choosing a medium or channel, you should ask yourself the following question: How can I reach the target group? Or: My message is clear and addresses the needs of the target group, but why advertise in the morning paper if the target group won't see it? Different media have different qualities. Communication tactics range from conventional mass media to personal influence, and each has its own strengths and limitations.

Organizations should use several different, complementary channels. Examples are a telephone helpline service, website, information letters, brochures, flyers, seminars, meetings or ads. Your starting point should be content that addresses the practical needs of the target group. The telephone helpline service and website are usually the most important channels during the initial stage, but not all of your audience will be receptive during this process. Not everyone in the target group will be capable of searching for information in the midst of a trauma. Sub-groups of the severely-affected target group, such as people suffering from acute psychological stress, may not be capable of looking for information by themselves or even defining the questions they need to ask.

Website

A website is one of several channels for reaching the target group. The purpose of the website is to inform, summarise, explain and provide support – preferably in real time.

The objective should be to provide public access to up to date and relevant information. There could be a page with RSS news feeds (headlines linked to daily newspapers and other media), links to other media and if necessary, a page for disclaimers, corrections and explanations.

The public gathers outside NK department store in Stockholm to honour the memory of Foreign Minister Anna Lindh. September 12, 2003. Photo: Claudio Bresciani.

Examples of website sections in addition to the home page could be: **"Questions and answers", "Where to find help", "Crisis update", "Contact us", "About Us"** and **"News",** plus a **"Corrections"** subsection where inaccurate information from the press and other sources is refuted. There could also be a section for different kinds of information letters.

The objective could be to produce your own texts, and reproduce any other information that is relevant for the target group. The home page will provide links to other sections and feature puff pieces with breaking news.

The content on the web page for people in crisis could have the following categories:

- Information from other groups and authorities (e.g., the Swedish Government Offices, the Police, the Swedish National Tax Board, the Swedish Rescue Services Agency, voluntary organizations and the Swedish Church)
- Expert advice
- Factual information (the grieving process, custody and financial issues, etc)
- Explanatory text and graphics (maps, translations, etc)
- Reports with text and photos
- Contact details, and other information about the organization
- News (from you, and other organizations)
- Search function for families who are trying to locate each other

An effective method for adapting the contents to the target group is to always consider their needs. The information should be relevant, current, adapted and quality assured. Another method could be to process and adapt information from authorities and other organizations if they cannot provide their own information fast enough. This information could be published in the "Questions and answers" section. Instead of describing the services offered by each organization, the services could be presented according to the specific needs of the target group. This would include identification, financial support, family law and so on.

Victims do not always need to know what organizations are responsible for different issues. If some topics are not handled by any specific organization, produce your own texts. Contact experts who can answer the questions that neither you nor any other organization can answer.

You should also analyse the information that this specific target group wants and needs when it visits your website during the first weeks and months. The target group consists of people in crisis; they may have lost family members or their livelihood and in some cases be physically injured. What questions are important to answer quickly? What needs are most urgent? What do victims and their families expect from us? Is information from other sources adequate?

And for the youngest members of the target group, you could publish and reproduce information that is particularly relevant to children and their families. One example is a Question Letterbox, where experts answer children's questions.

A wall with photos of people who died in the September 11 attack. Tribute Visitor Center has been created to show glimpses and fragments of the two towers and the people who lost their lives there. Photo: Seth Wenig.

Work processes and distribution of responsibilities for the website

The webmaster could be tasked with selecting, compiling, editing and publishing information, sometimes together with other page owners, for the telephone helpline service and the information letter editor. The webmaster could also propose new functions, assist developers with testing and feedback, and oversee new functions and technology.

Each page should also have an owner. This could be someone with special knowledge in a specific field or who is otherwise qualified to know whether the content on a page is appropriate and correct. The webmaster and page owners should decide together what pages are published, modified or deleted. The page owners will ensure that all content on their pages is correct, current and informative. The webmaster will ensure that the content is grammatically correct and comprehensible. The "manager" should be legally responsible and have ultimate control over the published content.

The biggest problem will be keeping the pages current. Approving and modifying texts is usually easy: either the webmaster asks the page owners to publish a page (that the webmaster has produced), or the page owners request new texts or updates.

The organization should synchronise all of its communication and measures. All channels should present the same information, regardless of the format. And every member of the crisis response organization should be aware of any planned measures. Following the events of September 11 in New York, all responders were gathered under one roof. All public authorities, voluntary organizations and groups that victims needed to contact were situated in the same building. This model could be worth copying; a practise that would facilitate victim support and improve coordination in general.

Adapting the website to the target group

The website should focus on victims and their families. The target group can be divided into subgroups. The subgroups could be: people who were there and lost one or more family members; people who were there and were injured, but did not lose a family member; people who were not there, but lost a family member who has not been identified, and so on. The first and primary target group should also be divided into adults and children. A second target group is the general public, in this case Swedes who were not there but want to know about the response. A third target group is other public authorities; a fourth is voluntary organizations and other support groups; a fifth is the media.

The first group is obviously the most important. This group is also special, because most of the victims and their families will be weak, fragile and unfocused. Some of the target group are children who are also in a state of shock. Some of the target group are presumably physically disabled. These conditions place great demands on the role of the information sender, specifically in terms of language, navigation and content.

Other aspects

The language must be extremely clear and easy to understand. It should be adapted to the receivers and unbureaucratic, without compromising the content. Complicated legal jargon can always be explained in plain English. The language level should be adapted to older children and most adults. Experience shows that this is the most appropriate level for presenting information without any loss of meaning. The website must be easy to navigate. Information should be easy to find and use. Coordination between the website and other channels is also important. The website editorial team could present and distribute the same information as the telephone helpline service and a flyer for example. This may prove difficult in practice however. Procedures should be developed for sharing or transferring information between the website editorial team and the telephone helpline service. A person could then be assigned to check information flows to and from the telephone helpline service and hold regular meetings with the purpose of transferring this information to the website editorial team. What could optimise a website that offers support to people in crisis?

Speed

A website should be set up for people in crisis as soon as possible. The format can be simple at first. Ideally, a permanent crisis response website should be set up with an address similar to the SOS number, 112. Different crises could have different sections with unique domain addresses.

Functionality

The website should provide targeted, adapted and straightforward information for victims and their families. The information should always be based on the victim's perspective. A website that requires a login and password, like the website in New York after September 11, is probably the most functional and supportive format for a crisis response website – especially if a liaison officer can work with individual families. A member's page should offer more detailed information than public pages. The website could also provide a forum and other interactive services for victims, as well as support forums run by private people and other organizations. As a responsible authority, you must be proactive. A good example would be a checklist for everything that a victim might need to take care of and find out, and suggestions for how problems can be solved. Bring in experts who can answer questions from victims, the public and the media.

Transparency

Say everything you know. Victims have a huge need for detailed information. Whether the page is public or private, information must be relevant and clear. Tell the truth. Avoiding certain words or some details causes more confusion and concern than being clear and open. Say everything that you know as soon as possible. Do not censor information. Silence, half-truths and rewrites tend to backfire and complicate an already difficult situation. Never lose sight of the victim's perspective – do not act like an authority. Act like you would want others to act if you were a victim.

Be yourself

Be yourself when you speak to victims. And listen to what they have to say. Once again – never lose sight of the victim's perspective! Be open and clear about what you want to achieve.

Describe your goals right from the start, that support will end and the possible outcome. **"This is what we can give. This is what we can achieve together!"** Repeat your goals until they sink in. Pump the information out through all channels. Victims listen, but they do not "receive" like other people. It's okay to push. Too much attention is better than too little.

Other information channels

Communication should take place via several complementary channels. The website, a telephone helpline service, information letters and other printed material, seminars and meetings form the basis.

Information letters

Information letters are designed for people who want to receive information by mail or do not have internet access. An information letter could have less text and more graphics than the website. The advantage is that people can read information letters when they have time.

Ads

Advertising in newspapers will help you reach large and unknown target groups. Ads can describe the support that is available. You can also send flyers to organizations that deal with target groups, such as insurance companies and support groups for families, relatives and friends.

Advertising can also take place via support group forums on the internet. Once again, receivers should constitute your starting point. Not everyone in the target group may be receptive to new information on the day your ad is published.

Telephone helpline service

You could set up a telephone helpline service to facilitate communication between various organizations and families or victims. This service should have top priority. It must be able to handle the expected volume of calls, and respond to questions via email or letter.

The aim of the service could be to guide individuals to the relevant departments in public and municipal authorities, i.e. a referral function. The service could also offer advice and information on insurance companies, voluntary organizations and religious groups. The primary task would be to provide information, however, and try to make life easier for victims and their families.

A professional helpline service requires the mobilisation of a solid knowledge base at short notice. You should study all of the relevant organizations' websites and compile any information that may be useful. The material can then be divided into different topics. You could engage official experts or contact people to make the knowledge base as comprehensive and relevant as possible. With each new question, the knowledge base will grow. Telephone helpline personnel should undergo "training" that focuses on information that could be relevant for victims and their families during the initial stage. The "training" should also include crisis communications, credibility and how to handle difficult calls.

Support and guidance must be easy to access. During periods when helpline personnel are not available, calls should be diverted to a reception centre where callers can leave their contact details and be contacted later. Other points to consider are the suitability of personnel for the telephone helpline service, and that any personnel who receive large numbers of difficult or complicated calls may also need support.

Media relations

Responding to the needs of the media by producing up to date information and answering their questions will promote good media relations. The most important reason for this is to provide up to date and accurate information for victims and their families.

Relatives gather to mourn two sisters who were killed in the Gothenburg disco fire in 1998. Photo: Åke Thim.

Experiences of RSOS

Efforts that followed the tsunami disaster soon showed that victims and their families wanted more than a telephone service that referred them to the responsible authorities and organizations. Their needs were much more complex.

People who called the helpline service sought help in a wide range of areas and wanted urgent answers to their questions. Callers were in deep crisis and a mere referral service would have worsened their situation. Helpline personnel dealt with all kinds of questions. If they could not answer themselves, they asked callers to leave their contact details. Personnel then contacted government agencies, companies and organizations to find the relevant information. They tried to give individuals the most comprehensive answers that were possible. The level of knowledge required by personnel was much higher than anticipated. Some questions led to minor investigations, and the need for a more permanent organization grew. As new issues emerged, the knowledge base expanded. The aim was that both the telephone helpline and the website would provide the same information.

The helpline service, which handled both phone calls and email, showed how setting up a broad knowledge base as early as possible can help answer expected questions from victims. But the knowledge base must be constantly updated because questions will change over time. This service should be prioritized at an early stage.

The counselling panel that gave support and advice via telephone and email accounted for most of the contact with victims and their families, and was initially the only point of contact that RSOS had with these people. Another method for reaching the target group was through family support meetings. Family support meetings were arranged by RSOS after suggestions from some family members at an early stage. The aim of these meetings was to answer questions, and RSOS invited experts from the relevant organizations. When the identification process was most critical, representatives from the Swedish National Police Board's Home Commission attended the meetings.

A paper lantern for each victim lights up the darkness on September 26, 2005. Relatives and the local population stand side by side in remembrance of their loved ones one year after the tsunami. Photo: Adrees Latif.

Family support meetings helped the organization reach victims and their families. Reactions to these meetings were very positive. RSOS could speak to target group representatives about specific issues, provide important information and learn how their own services could be improved. Some of these meetings were formal; others gave family members and friends an opportunity to speak face-to-face to RSOS personnel. This was arranged after suggestions from some family members. This experience also showed how family support meetings should be based on the needs of the target group, and be flexible. When arranging family support meetings, all members of a group should be in a similar situation. At the first meeting arranged by RSOS, people expressed a strong desire to meet others with similar experiences. This was expressed by both seriously affected victims (lost a close family member, child) and those who were less seriously affected. The latter group felt that their grief was not as great as the worst-affected victims and they did not want to attract unwarranted attention.

Throughout the whole period, anticipated questions were analysed and answers were produced. Potential questions and answers from families, the public and media representatives were prepared so that the personnel working with families could feel well equipped and confident. The counselling panel also registered the number of calls and their nature, which provides a good basis for building crisis response organizations in the future.

Counselling groups and cooperation with voluntary organizations

Regular contact with voluntary organizations is recommended. This will provide valuable feedback from victims and their families. Many voluntary organizations set up counselling groups after a major crisis and these are led by experienced counsellors. All participants have similar experiences and meet regularly for one year; once a week in the beginning and then gradually at less frequent intervals. There are special groups for children and young people. The support groups are sometimes divided into those who have lost a close friend or family member, and those who have experienced the event but not suffered any loss. Counselling groups offered by the Swedish Red Cross, Save the Children and Ersta Diakoni after the tsunami disaster were well received by victims and their families. Counselling groups should be organized so that parents who have lost children meet others in the same situation, and those who have lost a partner meet others who have suffered the same loss, etc. Children and young people also need their own special groups. Victim networks have also been formed without professional counsellors. At one family support meeting, participants suggested that any funds for handling psychosocial support in the future should be invested in counselling groups so that more people could take part in a counselling group when they needed it most. Another experience is that the support offered by counselling groups is important. Some people claimed that psychologists should be trained in crisis intervention and preferably have good knowledge of the crisis at hand. Other activities run by the organizations could be public and private internet forums, meeting places and face-to-face therapy.

Concluding reflections

A central information channel for victims and their families that provides relevant and up to date information requires access to information. Both horizon scanning and a solid knowledge base are essential. Relevant websites should be constantly reviewed.

Photos of missing people after the Boxing Day tsunami at a Help Centre in Khao Lak, Thailand. Photo: SEMA.

Contact with public authorities and organizations should be maintained. Media coverage should be carefully monitored, and dialogue with victims and their families should continue.

The starting point for communication should be that the information must be relevant to victims in terms of time and how far they have progressed in their grieving process. Questions and answers that crystallise in the helpline service can be published on the website under the **"Questions and answers"** section. As different problems emerge via the helpline, these can be addressed on the website and in information letters. This presents opportunities for predicting some of the issues that may arise.

Information to victims must always be based on the receiver's perspective. The communication strategy can also confirm that all information/communication should reflect expertise, accessibility, transparency and facts, fairness, understanding and sympathy.

Expertise

Dealing with people in crisis requires expertise, i.e. knowing what to do and when. One example is providing support by being able to answer questions and referring people to the most appropriate counselling groups and other psychosocial support. Another example is knowing what other organizations are responsible for and communicating this information through different channels. Knowing what to expect and being able to predict the target group's needs in advance is another. People working with these tasks should have in-depth knowledge of their subject areas.

Accessibility

Accessibility can take different forms. Being close at hand, always answering questions and listening to the target group's needs for information are several examples. Another is using clear, plain English. Long opening hours for the telephone helpline service, and endeavouring to answer emails within 24 hours are also good examples. Another example is clear, easy to navigate websites that help users find the information they need. Your message should be: **"We are here when you need us".**

Transparency

Communicating all of the information that you have can be sensitive and sometimes difficult. But endeavouring to do so also signals transparency. You may acquire information that is too detailed and sensitive for the target group. As an organization that is not the sole provider of information, knowing how much and exactly what information you should convey is extremely difficult. You could even be accused of withholding information. But because the information will eventually reach the target group through other channels, you could be criticised for lack of transparency. For this reason, you should always communicate whatever information you have. Deciding what facts should be published is a difficult balancing act. You should provide any facts that are relevant, however. Different people in different organizations have different views on transparency. Deciding what and how much "sensitive" information should be published is also delicate. But not disclosing the facts may cost you your credibility as a sender next time, no matter why you choose to do so. Discussion might be needed to decide what, when and how information should be communicated. Agreeing on what transparency implies is essential.

Fairness

Fairness in communication means treating all victims equally, ensuring that everyone has equal access to relevant information and making sure that everyone understands the information that is provided. This usually leads to an understanding for the measures you take and a willingness to contribute. Although this is a basic democratic principle, it does not always apply in crisis communications. If everyone receives the same information, i.e. **"everyone gets all the information all the time"**, the message might be so general that it passes by unnoticed or has a minimal effect on the target group. Different target groups will be at different stages depending on their relation to the crisis. A refined target group definition will help you adapt your message to different needs.

Describe the focus of your organization and its decision processes on your website. Some family members might also have personal and specific requirements. Describe your background, motivation and considerations. This will help people understand the decisions you make.

Understanding/Sympathy

Your attitude towards victims and their families must not be offensive in any way. The ability to feel sympathy and understand is not enough; you have to communicate sympathy and understanding. Speaking in a manner that is sensitive, non-bureaucratic and cannot be misinterpreted will also show understanding. Your attitude must be professional.

Basing your work on these five values will inspire confidence in your ability to act and communicate. But because so many actors are responsible in a crisis, the same information should be communicated through each sender's channel. Extra care and effort is needed to check the sources. Maintain constant contact with authorities to determine who is responsible for information and check the sources.

Having a number of different communication routes is also recommended. People who are deeply affected by loss cannot always distinguish between rumours and inaccuracies and correct information. Communication efforts should focus on clarity. And information should be checked to prevent rumours and misunderstanding.

Communication efforts that focus on people in crisis require a high degree of expertise. Thinking informatively is vital, and transparency and accessibility should be the primary goals for your information processes. Transparency and accessibility are not always present in a public sector setting. All communication should be guided by a realistic and detailed picture of the target groups: the victims, the public authorities and organizations who respond to the crisis, the general public and potential employers.

Save the Children Sweden has long experience of working with children and grief.
Photo: Jan E Carlsson.

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