



ISSUES AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT PROTOCOL

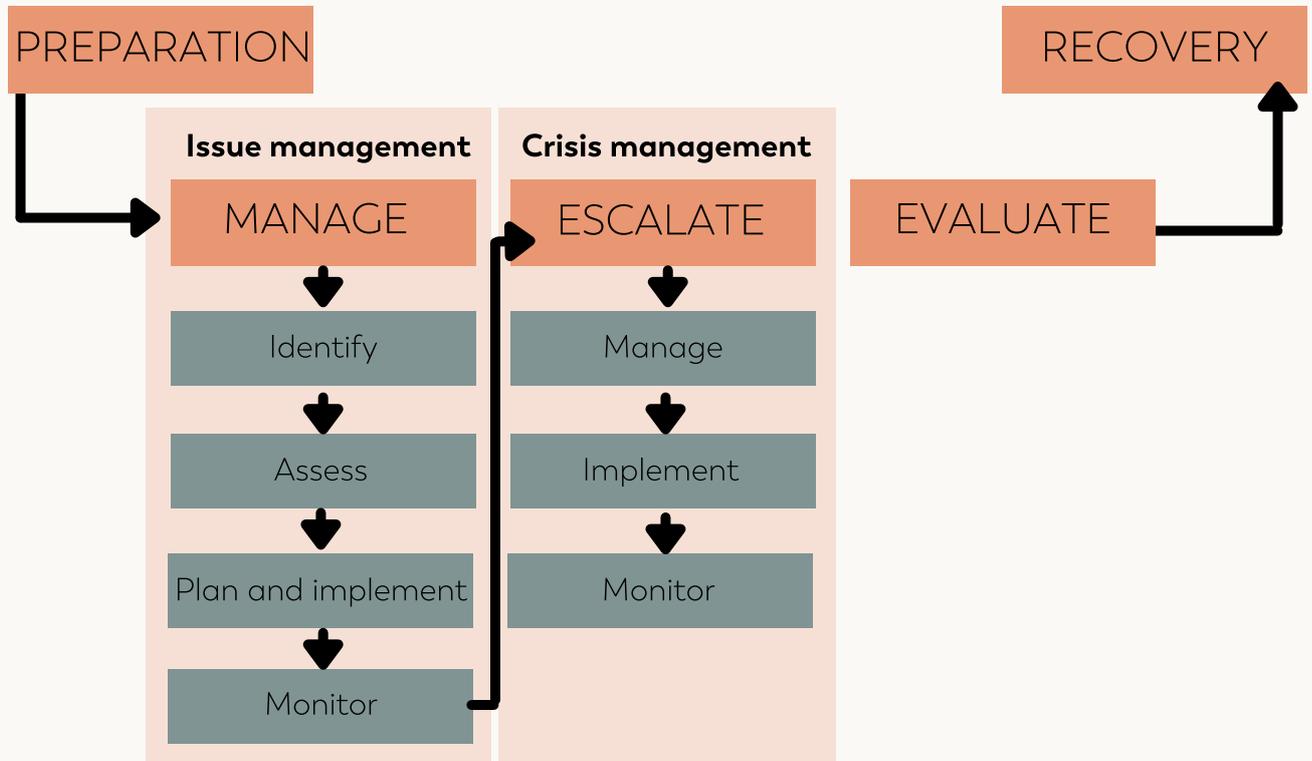
An issues management and crisis communications approach outlines how your organisation will identify and manage potential external issues.

Critical to managing an issue effectively is taking a proactive approach to identifying, analysing, responding to, and monitoring issues that may reach the public domain. Effective communications management of an issue or crisis is achieved through coordination, collaboration and appropriate development of materials to enhance our messages and engagement.

If your organisation does not manage issues well, there can be reputational consequences which can affect your ability to achieve your objectives and leading to a lack of trust. Developing an approved process helps to ensure you will be better prepared for whatever comes your way.

THE APPROACH

The following outlines an issues management process for preparation, identification and management of an issue or crisis situation. This process is based on the information from Issues and Crisis Management by Tony Jaques (aka the bible).



PREPARE

The key to effective issues and crisis management is prepared ahead of time. It is important that communication arrangements are determined ahead of time so that time is not spent when a crisis hits deciding, who, what, where and when.

Think about:

- Do you know how you will find out about a potential issue (risk register, business continuity planning, media monitoring, briefings)?
- Have you done any scenario planning? Do you know what types of issues you might face?
- Have you determined the thresholds for something moving to a crisis (what does “bad” look like for your organisation)?
- Which staff would form a crisis communications team? Do they have training and access?
- What potential complications could arise such as staff absences, lack of access to computer systems or the office? How can you plan for them now?
- Do you have a contact list of key people – name, position, phone number, email – likely to play a role in any crisis response both internal and external?
- Do you have an agreed process to manage (including approval points and identification of backup resources) key functions during a crisis such as the contact centre, website, media?
- Do you have a standard set of key messages and facts on the work of the organisation that you can draw on quickly?

ISSUE MANAGEMENT

Identify

Once an issue has reached the public domain, often via the media, it can be challenging to control.

Early identification and appropriate management—both internally and externally—can result in a more positive outcome and may minimise threats to the organisation's reputation. Issues can emerge in several contexts including:

- a difficult meeting with a stakeholder
- negative media reporting on our work
- a website or other external system going down for 24-hours or longer impacting users
- increasing demand on the contact centre, leading to long wait times
- a privacy breach
- a mail-out to stakeholders or clients about a contentious issue
- data quality or integrity issues with information published by the organisation
- policy development that will impact clients and stakeholders
- freedom of Information requests, particularly from media outlets or politicians
- issues relating to compliance or fraudulent activity.

Questions you should consider:

- Is it publicly known, or could it go into the public arena?
- Are there potential reputation issues?
- Is it likely that clients, stakeholders or the government will be upset?
- Are there potential financial or operational impacts?
- If the media were to hear about this, do you think they would write a story?
- Are there vulnerable people involved that are already impacted by other issues?
- Are there potential broader implications or could other government agencies be impacted?

Assess

Once an issue has been identified, it should be assessed based on its likely impact on a project, business area or the agency's reputation. Issues should be assessed on:

- What is the likely impact on the organisation?
- What is the level of external exposure of the issue?
- How could the issue potentially escalate?
- What level of influence do we have to change the issue? What is within our control?
- What number of resources/funding are we willing to commit to resolve the issue?
- Who else is involved (other government agencies, stakeholders etc)?

Plan and implement

Once an issue has been identified and assessed, it should be escalated to the appropriate person within your organisation. The strategy may be to monitor the situation, to put in place mitigation issues or to take a proactive approach – it will depend on the situation.

Managing an issue effectively may require a comprehensive approach including stakeholder and client management, communications and media relations. The expertise provided by the communications team at this time will be invaluable!

Monitor

You will need to proactively monitor the issue through media, stakeholder commentary/feedback, social media or feedback through other channels. You should be regularly briefing the Executive on the progress and mitigation activities.

During the monitoring stage of this issue, it may emerge that the issue is transitioning into a crisis. This trigger may be:

- more stakeholders making public comments – new voices adding to the story
- sustained negative media coverage – from more than one media outlet
- increasing negative feedback from important stakeholders
- increasing negative social media commentary on the issue
- multiple escalations to the Minister's Office.

ESCALATE: CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Once an issue has been identified as a crisis, there will need to be a significant escalation of activities. As an issue becomes a crisis, the right people need to be mobilised to address the issue, the Executive need to be briefed at the right time, and appropriate approvals must occur.

Escalation process

The type of issue may determine the escalation process. However, the following provides a basic outline that can be followed when it is determined an issue has not been resolved and is progressing to a crisis:



Mange

The key to managing crisis communications is setting up a dedicated team of specialists to focus on the issue - a crisis communications team.

This team is a central, delegated management group whose focus is on:

- determining the plan
- coordinating actions required
- advising the Executive
- presenting the organisation with a single voice
- responding quickly to requests for information
- being proactive towards key stakeholders, and
- understanding the importance of engaging with traditional and social media.

Implement

During a crisis, there is a need for strong, active management. The greatest risk during a crisis can arise from how we respond. Crisis communication requires developing and issuing messages under time pressure when emotions may be running high, and the organisation is under intense public and media scrutiny.

Think about:

- How can you ensure the information leaving the organisation is coordinated and consistent?
- What channels will you use and when?
- Who are the audience groups? There will be a broad range of audiences that will need to be proactively communicated with including staff.
- How will you manage requests for information from stakeholders that are approaching the organisation including media?

Monitor

Ongoing monitoring during the crisis is essential, to understand the effectiveness of the communications response and make adjustments as necessary.

Some things to consider:

- Who will provide it, when, what format, which reports should it play into, and what range of media should be included?
- When will monitoring happen (24 hours a day, only until an agreed time)? What happens after normal business hours? How do you manage these resources?
- Will Executive or ministerial briefs be required? How often and in what format (oral or written)?
- Will other teams need the information? What will they need and how will you get it to them?
- What other governance arrangements are in place? How will you maintain records? How will you respond to requests as they come in?

RECOVERY

Following a crisis, communication will play an essential role in helping an organisation reset relationships with those affected and rebuild any reputational ground that may have been lost.

Recovery should be on the agenda from the start of a crisis. If a crisis comes to an end, and we have not thought about how we will recover, we will lose the immediate opportunity to affect any lasting impact on our reputation.

Evaluate

After the crisis has been resolved, the efforts, activities, and processes should be evaluated and documented to support improvements for future incidents. This may include:

- An internal review of successes and failures of the crisis communications team to make any necessary changes.
- Interviews with staff, Executive and stakeholders to gather feedback on the approach and outcomes.
- Presentation of a report to the Executive.

Build trust through actions, not words

A crisis may fundamentally change a stakeholder's opinion of your organisation. Rebuilding trust means demonstrating that you can again meet their expectations. Reputation is best demonstrated in actions, not just words. The best way to recover it is to show how the organisation is delivering on the commitments and promises made during the crisis. Once the crisis is over, the organisation needs to ensure it doesn't get so focused on internal recovery that it stops being publicly visible.

Engage with staff

Recovery starts internally. Internal trust might have been damaged during the crisis, and employee morale might be low. This can affect performance and undermine wider efforts to rebuild confidence with external stakeholders. Make sure internal communication is an integral part of any recovery plan.

Reset the agenda through proactive communication

It is important that the organisation is not defined by the crisis, and that means skilfully and tactfully using communication to move the media and stakeholder agenda on and help to rearticulate our vision and purpose. Immediately following a crisis, develop a coherent, proactive communication plan to support future priorities.

CONTACT US

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