

Crisis Communication Guide

Every organization will face moments of challenge – from unexpected leadership changes to operational disruptions, data breaches, or reputational threats. In these moments, how you communicate is just as important as the actions you take.

Clear, timely, and values-driven communication can preserve trust, protect relationships, and help your organization navigate uncertainty with integrity. This guide offers a practical framework for building a simple, effective crisis communication plan. It outlines roles and responsibilities, key message principles, sample templates, and best practices so your team is prepared to respond with clarity and confidence.

Crisis Communication Team Structure

DECISION-MAKING TEAM (approves messaging):

- Executive Director / CEO
- Board Chair (or designated board member, if needed)
- Legal counsel (if needed)
- Communications/Marketing lead

DESIGNATED SPOKESPERSON:

- ONE person for consistency (usually the Executive Director or Communications Director)
- Must be adept and comfortable with media, donors, staff, and community under pressure
- Identify a back-up spokesperson

SUPPORT ROLES (as needed):

- Human Resources lead (staff communications)
- Program/Operations lead (service-related info)
- Administrative support (logistics, contact management)

EXTERNAL NOTIFICATIONS (in order):

- Legal counsel (if applicable)
- Insurance carrier and/or regulators (if applicable)
- Board of Directors / staff
- Key partners / donors / funders
- Clients / participants
- Public / media

Core Crisis Communication Framework

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE PROTOCOL (first 2–4 hours):

- Activate internal notification chain
- Brief legal counsel/board as needed
- Notify key stakeholders (staff, partners, donors)
- Issue initial holding statement (within 4–6 hours if possible)
- Provide ongoing updates as appropriate

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES:

- Acknowledge concern or issue without speculating or assigning blame
- Emphasize safety, wellbeing, and mission
- Be transparent within legal/ethical bounds
- Outline concrete steps being taken
- Provide a clear contact person and channel for questions

Sample Message Templates

DATA BREACH / SECURITY ISSUE:

We are aware of a potential data security incident and are investigating with the support of experts. Protecting the privacy of those we serve is our highest priority. We will provide updates as more information is available. For questions, contact [spokesperson/contact info].

LEADERSHIP TRANSITION (unexpected):

Our [Executive Director/CEO] has stepped down, effective immediately. We thank them for their service. An interim leader has been appointed while our board initiates a search. We remain committed to our mission and to serving our community with integrity.

PROGRAM/SERVICE DISRUPTION:

Due to [circumstance], we are temporarily suspending [program/service]. We are working closely with partners to ensure continuity of support for participants and will communicate updates as the situation evolves.

STAFF MISCONDUCT ALLEGATION:

We have been made aware of allegations involving a staff member. The individual has been placed on leave pending investigation. We are cooperating fully with the appropriate authorities. The wellbeing of those we serve remains our top priority.

Key Recommendations

- Pre-approve core messaging with leadership and legal counsel
- Designate one spokesperson to ensure consistency
- Prepare “holding statements” for when details are limited
- Consider translation/multilingual needs
- Keep contact lists updated quarterly
- Conduct annual crisis communication drills with key staff and board

Note: *This guide is a starter tool. Larger organizations may need a more detailed plan with scenarios, stakeholder mapping, and after-action reviews.*

This guide was developed by Madalyn Metzger, MBA, Everence® Chief Marketing Officer, for the 2025 Everence Development Conference. It draws on best practices in crisis communication, legal and regulatory guidance, and practical experience from organizational leaders. The goal is to provide a concise, values-centered tool that can be tailored to fit the size, mission, and context of each organization.

