



Communicating in a Crisis
as honest brokers of accurate
information


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Disclaimer

**All the
answers**



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Context

- Roles
 - ☐ Elected official
 - ☐ Staff
- County size
 - ☐ < 400K
 - ☐ 100 – 400K
 - ☐ 50 – 100K
 - ☐ > 50K
- Comms or PIO staff
 - ☐ Full time
 - ☐ ODAA



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Today

- 1 – Planning
- 2 – Doing

- Handouts
- Slides



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Communications Planning for a Crisis Response

“You’ve got to plan the work before you can work the plan”

Reba’s dad



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Identify a designated comms liaison

- Not someone with a major operational role (EX: sheriff or fire chief)
- Someone readily accessible, well-spoken, respected, knowledgeable, (ideally) already known to reporters
- Authority to make on-the-fly decisions without layers of approvals
- Part of the crisis response team before, during and after an emergency



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Anticipate issues

- Ensure a communications plan is part of your emergency planning process
- Plot comms response to any tabletop exercise or scenario planning
- Identify your core messages and use them



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Get organized

- Create and update monthly a list of current team members and alternates
- Monitor social media
- Compile a prioritized internal and external stakeholder audit
- Update your media list weekly (media credentials)
- Identify PIO staff from other jurisdictions who can provide comms back-up if needed (think comms mutual aid)
- Set up a “phantom” web page and You Tube channel



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Spreadsheet to get organized

Stakeholder type	Organization Name	Role	Primary contact name	Primary contact email	Primary contact cell
Hospital(s)	Regional health center	Comms director	John Doe	johndoe@thelocalhospital.com	803.55512
Cable companies					
Internet provider(s)					
Cell provider(s)					
School district(s)					
Individual schools					
adjacent jurisdictions					
Airport					
Water provider(s)					
Power provider(s)					
SCDOT					

- [LINK TO SPREADSHEET](#)



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Communicate with key groups

- Council and employees (see spreadsheet)
 - Phone tree
 - Virtual meeting
 - Text messages
 - Email chain
- Stakeholders (see spreadsheet)
 - Establish clear protocols for information sharing with neighboring jurisdictions, state agencies, and other stakeholders to ensure unified messaging.
- Designated staff person to be this point of contact



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Track media inquiries

- Track issues reporters raise
- Keep a record of which media covered what
- Track social media. The internet doesn't forget.
- Know what's out there after the crisis is over



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Do the right thing

- Be honest brokers of accurate information
- Build relationships and trust with the news media long before a crisis happens.
- Report your own bad news
- Remember the mic is always hot!



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Get ahead of misinformation

- Carefully follow all types of media – traditional, social media, blogs, etc.
- Address misinformation when necessary but not everything
- Identify staff role for tracking
- Use AI to help identify fake posts
- Remember all communication falls under FOIA



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Debrief

- Make sure to include your communications efforts in your debriefing activity.
 - ☐ Did you need a better process for returning media calls?
 - ☐ Were your channels of communication with the public adequate?
 - ☐ Did the identified spokesperson have the tools needed to respond adequately to questions?
 - ☐ How did you handle misinformation and rumors?
 - ☐ Did your chain of command work as intended?



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Key Take-aways

- Honest brokers of accurate information
- Designated staff roles
- Common messaging
- Upkeep of contact info

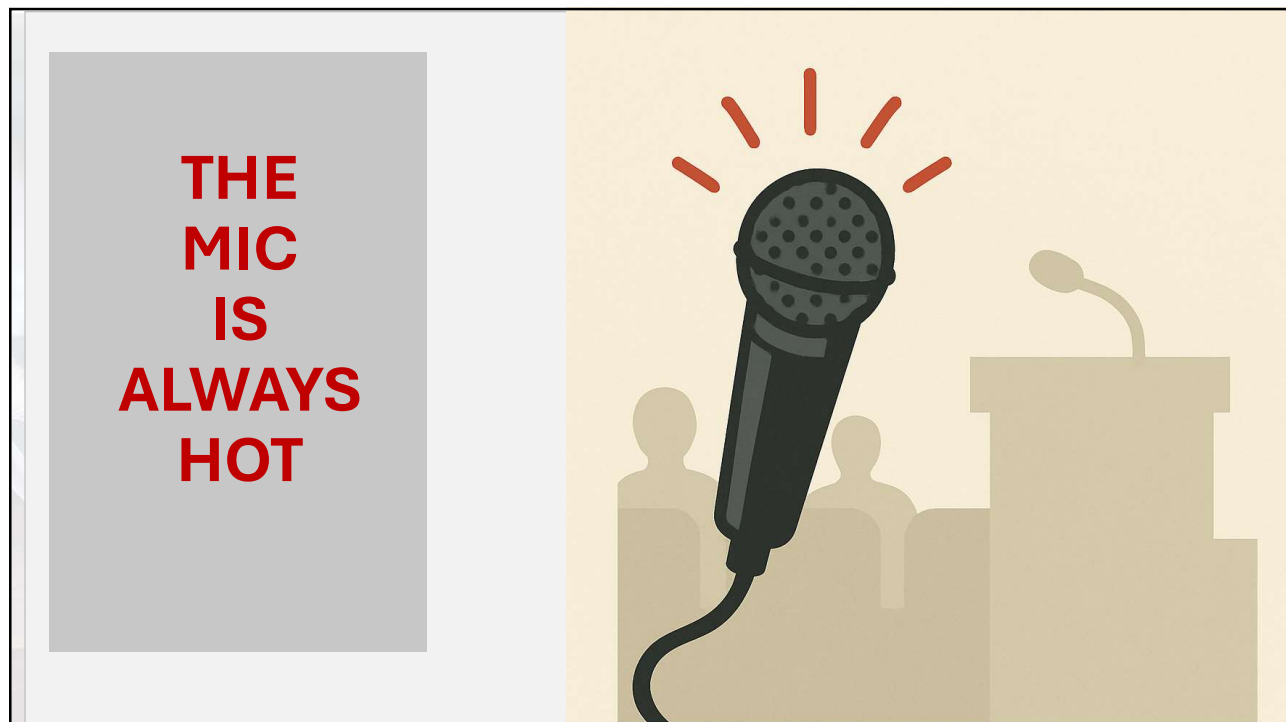


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Meeting the media



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Establish best practices

- Develop media relationships
- Be proactive
- Value accuracy and truth above all else
- Deal with local reporters first
- Stress what's true but avoid repeating misinformation or rumors.
- Maintain regular, proactive contact with the media and stakeholders, even if there is nothing new to report.



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Avoid “dodging” responses

- Be forthright in your comments and avoid "no comment" or "off the record."
- Try to have some comment, even if you can't give the whole story
- Never tell a reporter something you aren't willing to see in print.
- Be mindful of striking the balance between the competing needs of the public's right to know and legal issues.



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Prepare bridging statements

- “I don’t have that information at this time, but what I can tell you right now is ...”
- “I can’t address a hypothetical, but what I can tell you at this point is ...”
- I'm not going to speculate on the cause of the incident, but what I can share right now is ...”
- “Let me put that in perspective by adding ...”
- “What’s most important to remember here is ...”
- “That’s an important question, but for now we must be focused on ...”



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Breathe

- Recognize that nerves are normal before speaking in an emergency situation.
- Calm nerves with “square breathing”
- Use “verbal white space” to give you a second to regroup thoughts or slow down an aggressive exchange.



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Maintain calm, empathetic tone

- Project empathy and understanding in messaging, tone and body language
- Avoid “thoughts and prayers” as this phrasing often sounds trite and insincere. Options to consider:
 - “Our hearts are with those affected.”
 - “We stand with everyone in the community affected by this situation.”
 - “Support is available during this difficult time.”
 - “This tragic event is deeply saddening.”



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Avoid passive voice

- Use active voice statements whenever possible.

INSTEAD OF

“Mistakes were made by our staff.”

TRY

“Our staff made mistakes.”

INSTEAD OF

“The situation will be resolved.”

TRY

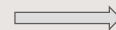
“We are taking steps to resolve the situation promptly.”



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Use people-friendly language

- Avoid jargon, acronyms
- Provide background on the situation even if it seems obvious (locations, names, context, etc.)
- Talk in soundbite sized phrasing
- Mirror questions back



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Use people-friendly language

- Avoid using negative statements. Instead of stating what you didn't do, flip it to say what you did do.

INSTEAD OF

“The county did nothing wrong in evaluating the risk of a water line break.”

TRY

“The county followed all protocols in evaluating the risk of a water line break.”



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Dress the part

- Consider branded clothes if appropriate
- Think through optics of various types of clothes (EX: uniforms, windbreaker, polo shirt, tie, suit, etc.)
- Watch for shiny badges, jewelry that can catch light
- Avoid loud, jangly jewelry/accessories that can make annoying sounds
- Be mindful of long hair that can brush a lavalier mic
- Consider where to clip a mic battery if using a lavalier mic
- Watch body language



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Understand staging

- Lighting
 - Natural light – moves with sun?
 - Adequate for TV?
 - Background reflections or bounce
- Audio (the mic is always hot)
 - Mult box
 - Ambient sounds
 - Quality mic/speakers
 - Adjustable height mic
- Stage size
- Lectern
 - Height/width
 - Flat top
 - Shelf
- Nice to haves
 - Branded mic flag
 - Branded pop-up banner/flags
- Other considerations
 - Handicap access
 - Mic for questions



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Key Take-aways

- Be mindful of your words, actions and body language
- Control your message through preparation
- Relationships matter



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Questions?

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A QR code is located in the bottom right corner of the slide. The background of the slide is a blurred image of a desk with a keyboard, a stack of books, and a laptop.

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