

Developing a Crisis Communication Plan: 5 Important Strategies

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Develop and Practice a Crisis Communication Plan

High-profile critical incidents and crises threatening the integrity, reputation, and standing of a law enforcement agency typically generate intense public scrutiny of a department. How department leaders respond to the community during these difficult times can affect public trust and, ultimately, support for the agency. This makes crisis communication an integral part of its operations; however, this aspect is often overlooked. Law enforcement agencies devise operational plans and train for almost all eventualities but somehow the one area of the department that can greatly affect its relationship with the community and local media often operates without a plan and with limited training. Establishing a plan and practicing it with smaller scale incidents, such as a weather event or a crime scene affecting commuters, is the first step toward managing the department's messaging during a controversy.

This article will look at five important strategies that should be part of any agency's crisis communication plan.

STRATEGY 1 **Leverage social media as a monitoring tool and to establish the department as the official source of information as a means to refute false narratives**

As soon as an incident takes place, the agency should immediately begin monitoring social media. This requires having a system set up before the crisis strikes so that the response is automatic. This step ensures the department is aware of the totality of the circumstances, including public opinion. Just as important as having a system for monitoring social media when an incident occurs is having a simple process in place for passing on the information to the commanders in charge, so they have all available information when making decisions.

The agency should establish itself as soon as possible as the official source of information about the incident. This served the Orlando Police Department very well when the public information office sent out back-to-back tweets about the Pulse Nightclub mass shooting, resulting in the deaths of 49 people. The first confirmed the incident while the second informed the media and public that the agency would provide all official information.¹



¹ Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, Police Foundation. (October 2017). *Rescue, Response and Resilience, A critical Incident review of the Orlando public safety response to the attack on the Pulse nightclub.*

Information and misinformation travel at lightning speed online, which requires law enforcement to react much more quickly than in years past. Uncorroborated information and inaccurate perceptions can become the reality for citizens and members of the media. It is imperative that departments set the record straight when a false narrative begins to circulate about the incident. The Boston Police Department broke new ground when it became the first agency to refute inaccurate reporting and postings about the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.²



STRATEGY 2 Hold regularly scheduled briefings with a commander and follow up with frequent updates

While social media is a significant tool for managing communications during a high-profile event, it does not replace the need for regular briefings by the chief or sheriff or another high ranking commander. Community members seek leadership when a tragic or controversial incident occurs. The head of an agency can become the voice of strength, calm, and compassion.

STRATEGY 3 Establish a system for rapid and frequent internal communication

Just as important as external communication is effective internal communication to ensure all officers and employees are hearing directly from the head of the agency. This requires assigning someone the task and establishing an internal communication system before an incident. With email open rates waning in recent years, many agencies are now relying on internal blogs or vlogs to keep the department informed. Since the public information office will be extremely busy with external communications during a critical incident, it would be wise to select someone in the chief's office or a commander to draft the internal messaging. This individual would reach out to the public information office for key messages and then amend the message as necessary before providing the text to the chief for review. Any messaging that is developed for external audiences should be shared with the internal audience, either simultaneously or just before the public release of the information. This is vital for maintaining morale and the department's cohesiveness during a challenging time.

STRATEGY 4 Reach out to key stakeholders

Depending on the nature of the incident, key stakeholders could include elected officials, community or business groups, leaders of the affected area, activist organizers, fire chief, emergency manager, school superintendent, local hospital, public works, electric or gas company, or the subject's family members. It is essential to keep these individuals involved and updated to ensure they have a voice and feel part of the process or the solution. If necessary, assign a department liaison to keep some of the key stakeholders informed.

² City of Boston, Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, City of Cambridge, Town of Watertown, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, Transit Police Department, Massachusetts National Guard, Massachusetts State Police (December 2014) *After Action Report for the Response to the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings*



While every incident is unique, it can be very productive to have a leader of a key stakeholder organization attend or speak at the news conference. If there is a concern about possible unrest in an area of the community, inviting leaders of that specific area to join the news conference can help deescalate the situation. Orlando's Mayor Buddy Dyer and then-Police Chief John Mina collaborated with numerous community leaders immediately following the Pulse Nightclub shooting. They included the President of the Islamic Society of Florida in their second news conference and Mayor Dyer reiterated that the attack was not a referendum on the LGBTQ, Hispanic, or Muslim communities and that Orlando, "won't be defined by hate, but by how we respond, with love, compassion, and unity."³

STRATEGY 5 **Connect with your community before the crisis**

The time to build strong community partnerships and public trust in the agency is well before a public crisis or controversial incident. This relationship building creates a team approach to making a community safer. If the department shares information on all aspects of its operations and is open to healthy two-way discussion, it naturally encourages more citizen involvement. This level of transparency will ultimately help sustain confidence during a tragedy or controversy.

Balancing the need to protect the integrity of an investigation and the public's right to know is always a challenge. However, a swift, strong, and proactive response to a crisis is imperative to maintain public confidence, support, peace, and order. An agency is often defined by how it handles a crisis, making it necessary for departments to develop a crisis communication plan and to practice it with smaller events. When a critical incident occurs, the community needs a strong, empathic, compassionate leader who is open and accountable and ultimately instills calm before chaos can reign.

Laura McElroy is a technical advisor for CNA's Institute for Public Research, Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Police Executive Research Forum, and other law enforcement law enforcement associations. Laura shares media relations and social media best practices in building strong community relationships and a team approach to combating crime. She spent eleven years as the Director of Communications for the Tampa Police Department and sixteen years as an award-winning television reporter and anchor.

³ Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, Police Foundation. (October 2017). *Rescue, Response and Resilience, A critical Incident review of the Orlando public safety response to the attack on the Pulse nightclub.*