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**SIX POINTS FOR IMPROVING  
CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLANS**  
THE APPLICATION OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION  
FOR EFFECTIVE CRISIS RESPONSE

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a resource for businesses, government agencies, and all organizations that seek to improve their crisis communication strategies. Researched and written by academic and industry experts in crisis communication, the paper:

1. explains the unique challenges of communication in emergency situations
2. outlines critical success factors for effective communication
3. examines videoconferencing as a communication tool to improve the results of crisis preparation and response

This report is supported by the results of a survey among 331 crisis professionals in a wide variety of industries around the world.

Based on the findings of this report, readers should be able to determine how they can best integrate video technology into their crisis communication strategies. They will also be able to measure the effectiveness of an investment in video for crisis response time and competency.





## INTRODUCTION



Human communication is at its most natural when we are in immediate proximity, talking and listening to one another face to face. When we see each other, the opportunity for dialogue and two-way interaction occurs freely. We are given context and non-verbal indicators such as facial expressions and body language to help us interpret meaning.

The evolution of technologies (e.g. orthography, telephones, radio, facsimile messages, and computer-mediated tools such as e-mail or instant messaging) has isolated us from the rich, natural context for human interaction. These devices create challenges for comprehension and working together, even in everyday life, because they lack the visual element.

Communication challenges are exacerbated during a crisis when time is short, decisions are urgent, information limited, and our opportunities for the rich interaction we require are constrained. Pressure is greater during a crisis. Crises have the potential to disrupt or destroy normal operational processes, cause financial harm, damage reputations, and threaten personal safety. For an enterprise, a crisis can put at risk the continued existence of the business itself. These dangers make it essential that an organization be prepared for crisis communication well before a crisis ever occurs.

Ineffective communication has proven to be a major contributor to failures in crisis management and disaster recovery. During times of crisis, communication challenges can escalate problems into disasters<sup>1</sup>. Misunderstandings and lack of coordination can waste unnecessary time, money, and human resources. They can damage reputations, risk health and safety, and in the worst case, cost people their lives<sup>2</sup>.

Sometimes, simply the lack of information or confirmation of information accuracy can create widespread problems. The January 2006 "Sago Mine Disaster," in which a group of miners was trapped underground, illustrates this problem. A misunderstanding among the recovery team, which was relying on radio communication and handwritten notes, was sequenced to the crisis management center and resulted in false reports of "12 miners found alive with one fatality." This false information was circulating for nearly an hour when the facts of the situation were, grimly, precisely the opposite. Unfortunately, the incorrect message spread quickly through the assembled community and news media and created even more confusion. The recovery team and crisis management center likely would have benefited from multi-cue redundancies (including a face-to-face element) in order to confirm the information before passing it along.

<sup>1</sup> (Guarnieri, 2002; Klaene & Sanders, 2006; Ronen, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> (Chandler, Wallace, & Feinberg, 2006)



### CRISIS COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES



What makes communication during a crisis so much more difficult than everyday interactions? Crises are usually fast-paced, stressful, and urgent situations in which critical (sometimes life and death) decisions often have to be made with limited or changing information.<sup>3</sup>

It is important for crisis managers to discern appropriate responses to different types of threats. Correctly determining when a crisis situation demands a non-routine organizational response is part of their challenge. Complicating successful responses to crises are widely held myths that have been pervasive in business culture for a long time.<sup>4</sup>

**Too many organizations operate under the false assumptions that:**

- Crises cannot be planned for
- Crises cannot happen to us
- Our organization is safe, secure and well-run
- Most crises resolve themselves
- Crises turn out not to be important
- Crises are just the cost of doing business
- Planning for crises is a luxury

As a result, far too many companies are inadequately prepared for crises. Studies indicate that only half of large organizations in North America have an effective crisis management plan.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a recent study of crisis professionals indicated that as many as 80% of companies that do have crisis management plans need to modify them in order to accommodate changing world events.<sup>6</sup> Even those with plans in place have overlooked many of the specific communication problems that typically arise during a crisis.

**Crisis communication challenges can be segmented into four main categories:**

Participation Barriers  
Command, Control, Coordination (C-3) Inefficiencies  
Information Quality  
Collaboration Issues

<sup>3</sup> (Coombs & Sherry, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> (Brewer, Chandler, & Ferrell, 2006, p. 4; King, 2002, p. 244; Panchant & Mitroff, 1992; Smith, 2005, p. 312; Solomon, 2003)

<sup>5</sup> (Solomon, 2003)

<sup>6</sup> (Chandler & Wallace, 2002)



### Common Crisis Communication Challenges

#### Participation Barriers

- Relational and liaison barriers<sup>7</sup>
- Motivation/morale and stress issues<sup>8</sup>
- Lack of participation of all key stakeholders
- Inherent communication technology weaknesses

#### Command, Control, Coordination (C-3) Inefficiencies

- Lack of sustained authority
- Inability to ensure suitable behavioral compliance
- Incorrect resource deployment
- Breakdown in logistics maintenance
- Time pressures

#### Information Quality

- Poor and inadequate information exchange
- Poor reconnaissance or information-gathering capacities
- Lack of sustainable communication systems with rapid feedback
- Lack of ability to identify relevant and discard irrelevant information
- Inability to convey accurate meaning (explicit and implicit)

#### Collaboration Issues

- Lack of constructive discussion among relevant participants during decision-making
- Lack of collaborative decision-making opportunities and procedural arrangements
- Inability to get information to and from the right people at the right time
- Challenges of geographic dispersion

<sup>7</sup> (King, 2002)

<sup>8</sup> (Eckman & Lindlof, 2003)



## POINT #1

An effective crisis communication plan should ensure that response groups communicate with each other on a regular basis prior to any crises. Familiarity (experience, practice, tests, etc.) with people, tools, communication modalities, and the plan, reflects the importance of pre-crisis communication to enhance crisis communication.

## POINT #2

During a crisis, there are times when it is important to utilize rich media communication channels to enhance communication effectiveness (including feedback, participation, stress monitoring, and non-verbal cues)

### PARTICIPATION BARRIERS

Crises require cross-communication among groups that are not in the same physical location and may not interact on a regular basis. Government agencies, businesses, health officials, external experts and the public all need to share information in order to respond effectively to a large-scale crisis. These groups may not have in-person meetings with each other often. They are made up of people who may not know each other well and may not have developed an understanding of the non-verbal cues that comes from frequent face-to-face contact.

In place of face-to-face meetings, most organizations tend to rely on communication tools such as radio, telephone and email, which do not easily allow for rich, real-time interactivity. These tools hinder the natural communication process and require users to guess at some of the information, or the context, of what is being shared. These technologies are known as “lean” communication channels.

For everyday situations, lean channels may be sufficient because there is time to confirm and reconfirm information. In a crisis, however, lean channels may not allow for all of the information essential to response to be communicated. At the same time, in a crisis users are under a significant amount of emotional stress. They need to gather and decipher information quickly, while potentially facing physical harm. The lean communication tools are simply not robust enough to avoid the misinterpretation that can result from stress. Rich, natural communication is required.

### COMMAND, CONTROL, AND COORDINATION (C-3) INEFFICIENCIES

Command, Control, and Coordination (C-3) operations are difficult to orchestrate in the midst of an emergency situation and are often the most challenging aspect of a crisis.<sup>10</sup> Focus tends to be placed on sending commands, but pitfalls related to receiving and understanding information are often unaddressed. C-3 failures can result in dire consequences, particularly when subordinates do not receive, understand or obey instructions from superiors.

The reverse is also dangerous. Superiors can also exhibit a similar lack of understanding of information presented from the field, often resulting in poor decision making.

Although command and control may imply a “top-down,” hierarchical view of operations management, rarely are C-3 activities executed in a meaningful way by individuals wielding unique authority. They are almost always the product of a high quality team communicating and coordinating effectively. Therefore, C3 operations can benefit from clear communication rules, such as turn-taking and clarification of roles and responsibilities.

<sup>9</sup> (Davis & Gilman, 2002; Hale, 1997; Weiner, 2006)

<sup>10</sup> (Chandler, Blue et al., 2006; Coombs, 1999)



### POINT #3

An effective crisis communication plan should make roles and responsibilities clear so that processes are well understood and all parties are included in time of crisis.

### POINT #4

An effective crisis communication plan should use all available methods to gather information directly from the field and confirm critical information with a feedback loop.

#### INFORMATION QUALITY

Ineffective crisis teams can suffer from inadequate information exchange. This may be the result of poor reconnaissance or information-gathering capacities, either due to human error or technology limitations in reaching the information source. They may lack sustainable communication systems with rapid feedback. Without a feedback<sup>11</sup> loop, it is difficult for teams to identify relevant information and discard irrelevant information. Teams need to practice gathering and sorting through information prior to any crisis in order to quickly identify what is the most essential.

#### COLLABORATION ISSUES

High success rates in crisis response have traditionally been associated with team response<sup>12</sup> as opposed to individual response. Coordination, trust, and diversity of information all can contribute either to a team's success or to its failure during a crisis event. The effective team is the one that "optimizes the processes for getting, storing, retrieving, allocating, manipulating, interpreting, and discarding information."<sup>13</sup>

Teams, however, have additional coordination overhead that cannot be ignored. Among the most predictable challenges in sustaining effective team communication are 1) distributed personnel, including decision makers and actors, 2) distributed decision-making processes, 3) distributed information exchange networks, and 4) overlapping systems requiring coordination.<sup>14</sup> These challenges make it extremely difficult for a team to come to a fully-informed decision that involves all of the key stakeholders.

In crisis situations, teams may be even more distributed than usual. Travel disruptions may occur at the very time when rich and extensive face-to-face interaction is most imperative to manage the situation. During a pandemic, for example, quarantines may keep people inside their houses. Natural disasters may make roads or public transportation inaccessible. Such distribution can lead to confusion and ineffective crisis response.

Researchers Mortensen and Hinds contend that "geographically distributed teams also may find it more challenging to clarify misunderstandings and work out difficulties. Therefore, the likelihood of such issues developing into full-blown conflict within distributed teams is higher."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the rhythm of face-to-face decision making appears to be a desired behavior that is utilized in co-located teams and distributed teams alike.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> (Hale, 1997; Majchrzak et al., 2005)

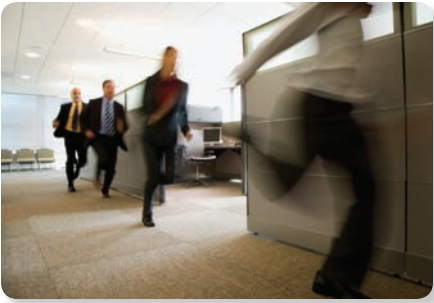
<sup>12</sup> (King, 2002; Pearson & Clair, 1998)

<sup>13</sup> (Cameron & Whetton, 1983, p. 60)

<sup>14</sup> (Athans, Ducot, & Tenney, 1980; Majchrzak et al., 2005)

<sup>15</sup> (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001, p. 218)

<sup>16</sup> (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000)



## POINT #5

Communication that builds mutual trust among team members should be a key planning focus long before a crisis occurs.

## POINT #6

An effective communication plan should address potential problems inherent in group dynamics. While ensuring that the team has cohesive objectives, crisis managers should be sure to provide outlets for team members to express disagreement, ask questions, and (re)evaluate assumptions.

Various factors have been found to impact team effectiveness negatively. Such factors include insufficient time, lack of information resources, procedural conflict, poor group leadership, uninterested and unmotivated members, no organizational assistance, no financial compensation and changing organizational expectations.<sup>17</sup> The normal checks and balances that are provided by more time, routine meetings, less stress, and extended face-to-face interaction are often missing in crises, leading to poor team performance. Even the most experienced teams can display divisiveness, “groupthink,” personality dominance, inaccurate group perceptions, and poor information disclosure.

The strength of teams is found in the input of different points of views, challenges, and even disagreements that provoke the team toward better decisions and actions. Diversity of perspectives can be utilized as a powerful resource. On the other hand, teams need to be focused on common objectives and work together closely to ensure that fragmentation does not derail them. In order to avoid unhealthy divisiveness, a common understanding of the problem and procedures is necessary for effective crisis management.<sup>18</sup>

One key factor in avoiding the divisiveness problem is trust. Trust has long been associated with what makes work in organizations possible.<sup>19</sup> Familiarity with team members allows both centralized and distributed teams to be better prepared for problem solving, information evaluation and task delegation. It is promising that the level of trust in distributed teams may approach that of centralized teams given enough time and the right communication tools.

Among the goals for teamwork during crises is to achieve the optimal level of interaction so that the team sustains its cohesion and coordination. However, the team must also retain the “tension” of challenging different points of view, critically assessing proposed decisions, and maintaining a healthy sensibility about the limitations of the team itself. While cohesion can make a group strong, it can also increase a tendency to slip into “groupthink,” whereby proposals are uncritically accepted by team members who don’t want to “rock the boat” by challenging the prevailing opinion. Team cohesion is often substituted for more a more rational decision process afforded by more diverse views.

The very nature of crisis situations makes them conducive to “groupthink.” High stress levels, time pressures, a team’s need for sustained high levels of cohesiveness, the urgency for a solution to problems, as well as the use of only lean communication tools can limit a team’s interaction (and healthy disagreements). These characteristics, along with the probability that crisis team leaders are in that role because of their perceived expertise, increases the danger of “groupthink” during crises.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> (King, 2002, p. 239)

<sup>18</sup> (Horsley & Barker, 2002)

<sup>19</sup> (Wilson, Straus, & McEvily, 2006)

<sup>20</sup> (Schiano & Weiss, 2006)



Many de-briefing sessions of poor decision-making groups uncover individuals who were silent (while disagreeing) because they did not want to appear to “break up” the harmony of the team. This silence could be caused by self-censorship of personal opinions or the vetting of critical information from outside sources. Some of the decision-making breakdowns that led to the space shuttle Columbia disaster have been attributed to critical information that was in fact known, but not utilized in the decision-making process.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to divisiveness and groupthink, teams can also suffer from the personality dominance of certain individuals. When a single member or subset of the group becomes too dominant, information may not be fully disclosed and false assumptions may be made. An over-reliance on personal judgment and reduced contributions of team input will cause some leaders, using directed leadership styles, to fail to recognize that what appears to be consensus among the team is in fact merely fragmented silence.<sup>22</sup> This tendency is particularly problematic in geographically dispersed teams.<sup>23</sup> No crisis handler wants to be hampered by the “paralysis of over-analysis.” However, as in the case of Columbia, quick decisions are often made by individuals that do not or will not take the additional time needed. These groups have suffered the consequences of inefficiencies, losses of financial opportunities and sometimes even human life.

#### APPLICATION OF VIDEOCONFERENCING TO CRISIS COMMUNICATION

We have identified the pitfalls that can render organizations ineffective during a crisis and outlined how well thought out crisis communications plans can assist in preparing a team to respond. Most importantly, we have seen how the richness of face-to-face communication provides crisis teams with the resources they need in order to gather and act on information. In-person, face-to-face communication is not always possible, however, and under crisis circumstances may be even more difficult to achieve. It is therefore essential that crisis managers and business continuity planners seek tools that can achieve the most natural, rich communication possible. By incorporating the face-to-face element into their communication strategies from the outset, planners will find that in the event of a crisis, teams will be able to act more quickly, more accurately, and deliver more effective results.

<sup>21</sup> (Tompkins, 2005)

<sup>22</sup> (Henningsen et al., 2006)

<sup>23</sup> (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001)



Business-quality videoconferencing provides a rich communication channel for crisis response. Unlike lean channels such as radio, telephone, and e-mail, it provides the natural, face-to-face element that is so essential for success. As an information-gathering tool, videoconferencing allows for accurate reconnaissance straight from the field. By providing real-time interactivity, video reduces the chances of misinterpretation and allows for immediate confirmation of information. The capacity for simultaneous, multi-site video connections among dispersed team members and multiple stakeholder groups helps create a cohesive, coordinated crisis response. In addition, regardless of location, experts can be brought into the crisis response team and aid in the decision-making process.

Given an option during a crisis, reverting to a leaner media (text or audio only channels) makes no more sense than using less than the best personnel available. In general, the more “rich” the interaction and the more natural and free from artificial constraints of “lean” channels, the more effective the quality of the communication will be.

As we have demonstrated, teams that have built a level of trust and unity tend to respond more quickly and accurately to uncertain circumstances. The ability to “see” other people when communicating has been proven to establish trust, help participants remember information, and ensure accountability. By providing a rich communication experience in which more than just data is conveyed, visual interaction can improve teamwork during crises. Selecting technology that supports the highly interactive group processes such as brainstorming, idea evaluation and consensus-building is critical.<sup>24</sup> Specific training on the use of visual technology to achieve the cohesion/diversity balance in a team and monitor for “groupthink” tendencies should also help crisis teams monitor and correct for the dysfunctional tendencies of group dynamics.

#### THE ROLE OF THE BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANNER

The communication benefits of visual technologies point back to the importance of actively working on a crisis communication plan that prepares teams for response well before a crisis ever occurs. Business continuity planners and information technology experts must work together to decide what is best for their organization. Together, they should build a strategy of training and adoption of rich technologies so that they become a standard part of day-to-day communication as well as enable success during emergency situations.

Planners should take an active role in the selection and implementation of communication technologies in order to ensure that their organizational needs and objectives are met. With the above six points for crisis communication in mind, crisis experts should test any communication solution to be sure that it provides the rich, natural interaction necessary for success.

<sup>24</sup> (Hale, 1997, p. 252)



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#### ABOUT TANDBERG

**TANDBERG** is a leading global provider of visual communication products and services. The company has dual headquarters in New York and Norway and provides sales, support and value-added services in more than 90 countries worldwide.

TANDBERG has experience designing videoconferencing solutions for crisis communication. We work closely with Federal and local government agencies, hospitals, schools and businesses that are putting together crisis communication plans. We offer a wide range of video endpoints, including immersive telepresence suites, boardroom applications, home-office desktop and Web-based solutions, and robust, flexible units for the field. The TANDBERG Total Solution also includes infrastructure and management tools that create a collaborative visual experience, future-proof your investment, and help you measure results.

Our solutions integrate seamlessly with other business continuity technologies, such as telephone, e-mail, instant messaging, PDAs, and Web conferencing. TANDBERG video can be implemented securely over IP, ISDN, satellite, and 3G networks, to help you respond in a variety of settings. What's more, diagnosis and troubleshooting of your video systems can occur remotely, so that you can manage your systems from anywhere your IT department may be.



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