

# A CRISIS COMMUNICATION GUIDE FOR PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS

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## Table of contents

Introduction.....	2
Crisis Communication Guide for Public Organisations	
PHASE 1 Preparation.....	12
1.1 Citizens.....	12
1.2 Planning.....	14
1.3 Communications.....	18
1.4 The news media.....	22
1.5 Response organisation and network.....	23
PHASE 2 Warning.....	25
2.1 Citizens.....	25
2.2 The media.....	26
2.3 Direct means of communication.....	27
2.4 Response organisation and network.....	28
PHASE 3 Crisis Response (Emergency).....	28
3.1 Citizens.....	29
3.2 News media.....	31
3.3 Direct means of communication.....	34
3.4 Response organisation and network.....	34
PHASE 4 Reconstruction (Recovery).....	36
4.1 Citizens.....	36
4.2 News media.....	38
4.3 Response organisation and network.....	38
PHASE 5 Evaluation .....	39
5.1 Citizens.....	39
5.2 News media.....	40
5.3 Response organisation and network.....	41
Appendix A Main Challenges.....	42
Appendix B Core dilemmas and common myths .....	48
Appendix C List of additional recommended guides.....	52

## Introduction

Life-threatening crises, such as natural and environmental disasters, terror attacks and epidemics are among those rare moments when communication with the public<sup>1</sup> may become an issue of life and death. Under these circumstances, effective communication with the public can save the life of many civilians.<sup>2</sup>

This guidebook is designed for public institutions that are interested in increasing their crisis readiness by enhancing crisis communication preparedness. Its target population consists of all those decision makers, spokespersons and public information officers whose roles involve dealing with crises. Practitioners are referred to as *crisis communication managers*.

The guidebook integrates the extensive international academic literature in this area with hands-on crisis communication experience based on interviews with spokespersons, journalists and other experts<sup>3</sup>.

Before turning directly to the core of the guide, the reader is advised not to skip the important framing sections which are located in the introduction and appendixes. In the introduction, the objectives of the guide and the typical lifecycle of a crisis are explained and described so as to enable a better understanding of the basic structure of a crisis and the dynamics that characterize its different phases.

The central part of the guide focuses on practical issues. It presents a composite of the kinds of actions, preparations, guidelines and principles that are needed to guide communication managers in each phase of a crisis: preparedness, warning, emergency, resolution and evaluation.

In the appendix vital background information is provided and the major challenges that foreground the pivotal role of crisis communication managers during times of crises are discussed. Next the main dilemmas which every crisis communication manager should consider in advance are listed. Finally a list of recommended crisis communication guides is given.

For every phase of a crisis, the guidebook distinguishes between three stakeholder groups. The first relates to the public, which is the ultimate addressee of all crisis communication activities and the final measure of its effectiveness. The second marks the communication activities, which mediate between the public and the crisis communication managers. The third embodies

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "the public" or "the audiences" are used in this guide only as a shortcut; obviously, there are different groups of citizens with distinctive needs, as stated in many places in this guide when the needs of these groups might be overlooked.

<sup>2</sup> The scientific basis of this guide is reported in (section 2 and 4 in) Vos, M., Lund, R., Harro-Loit, H., and Reich, Z. (2011), *Developing a crisis communication scorecard*. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities, University of Jyväskylä. (Ref.).

<sup>3</sup> The research leading to these results, has received funding from the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n° 217889.

the response network, including the organisation on whose behalf the crisis communication manager is acting as well as the collaborating organisations.

## Crisis management

Crises have become an inseparable part of life's routines. Around the world, humans face various threats and disasters, both natural and human-caused, the frequency and severity of which is greater now than ever in the past. <sup>1</sup> Handling these situations, first and foremost by trying to avoid or at least mitigate them, becomes the role of public institutions, including national and local governments, city councils, rescue organisations and various other organisations concerned with public safety. <sup>2</sup>

While the crises addressed in this guidebook fall into various categories, most share the following characteristics:

- A chaotic situation that threatens the current order; as the situation persists, the known reality undergoes a drastic change and the public's ability to comprehend and attribute meaning to what is happening is seriously challenged. <sup>3</sup> The public experiences stress, fear for the future and at times helplessness. <sup>4</sup>
- Large-scale crises present complex dangers, which include, in addition to the threat or damage to human lives, the collapse of infrastructures, technological and communication systems, as well as obstruction and blockage of roads that may impede rescue teams' access.
- The scope and level of complexity of a crisis render it into a systemic phenomenon that involves various authorities and institutions. The multiplicity of agents involved in the management of a crisis creates challenges for cooperation and possible conflicts of interest that may further complicate the situation and exacerbate the effects of the crisis.
- For public agencies and leaders involved in crisis management, crises represent a danger in terms of the potential for loss of control, reputation and public legitimacy and support; at the same time, these are rare opportunities for exhibiting vigorous and sensitive leadership, competency and resourcefulness.

These are some of the reasons why, so as to be able to meet the highest standards of the field, these agencies must continually strive to improve their crisis readiness in systematic ways. Early preparation is essential as it enables individuals and communities to experience as little impact as possible. <sup>5</sup>

Public organisations, that are responsible for public safety during times of crises, also have a substantial communicative role. The public has a right to receive, at all times, reliable and up-to-date information, to be able to make informed choices on which the safety and welfare of the individual and his or her family will depend. This right is substantially enhanced during times of

crisis, when the welfare and fate of people are endangered.

Therefore, organisations and public institutions striving to fulfil their roles properly must develop the competencies to communicate with their different publics in an effective manner. This can help save lives, minimize casualties, mobilize local residents to self-protect and make informed decisions based on reliable, up-to date information, and support social resilience, which is the foundation for a society's ability to face a crisis. They need to know what information people need about practical matters, such as food, water, medical treatment or shelter, and to provide it accordingly; they must learn how to monitor the acceptance of information, the degree of its comprehension and the extent to which additional information is required.

To carry out their task successfully, the various public organisations involved in dealing with a crisis must develop, ahead of time, a crisis communication strategy and make systematic arrangements, based on this strategy, that take into account the probability and severity of the risks associated with each specific crisis. They must become acquainted with or develop their own set of **inner** work practices, messages, methods and instruments for dealing with crisis communication in order to fulfil their role in the wider efforts to encourage preparedness and minimize loss of life and other damage.

To accomplish all this in accord with high professional and ethical standards, crisis communication managers must sometimes use different, non-routine methods in working with the public. While routinely they and their organisations feel that they are in control, during crises this may no longer be the case. While routinely they may, understandably, be concerned with their organisation's image, in a crisis they must focus on the higher purpose of saving lives. While routinely they may be convinced that they know well what "the public" needs and wishes to know, in a crisis, they must face the complexity of society and the particular needs and preferences of different publics. While routinely they base their decisions on experience and intuitions, during the different stages of a crisis they must strive to rely on evidence, which in turn entails the need to learn to obtain such evidence by monitoring public perceptions throughout all the phases of the crisis.

Crisis communication managers who wish to carry out their roles properly now have at their disposal research-based resources that have been continually expanding in recent decades. The areas studied include, among others, risk communication, which deals with information, facts, their implications, decisions policies that concern potential risks to society; crisis communication, which deals with events characterized by a high level of threat, short timeframe for decision making, sense of urgency and instability that can cause public anxiety; and disaster communication, which deals with situations such as natural disasters, plagues, diseases and regional conflicts. These areas, leaning mainly on the systematic exploration of case studies from the past and on pointing out the lessons that may be learned from them, supply a rich knowledge base concerning different aspects of crisis communication, including

practices, applications, types of messages, the public's perceptions of risks and its patterns of information seeking during crises.

This knowledge is valuable for those wishing to improve their communicative preparedness, adopt efficient strategies and practices, and formulate effective messages for various population segments. To accomplish this, crisis communication planners must seek ways to go beyond their always limited and partial experience they or their organisations have accumulated and utilize the existing knowledge for developing a broad-minded, evidence-based approach to crisis communication management.

### **Objectives of the guidebook**

- To serve as a compass and a set of roadmaps for organisations and public agencies engaged in comprehensive preparedness for crisis communication management based on the professional and ethical stance that saving human lives and reducing harm is the highest priority.
- To assist public agencies, in general, and those handling crisis communication, in particular, in forming effective crisis communication strategies.
- To establish stepping-stones for early crisis communication planning and the adoption of early problem-solving strategies that will allow for higher preparedness.
- To clarify ahead of time what situations, challenges, dilemmas and activities communication managers and their organisations are likely to face at times of crisis.
- To supply a set of practical instruments and guidelines of use to public agencies coping with crises.

### **Distinctive features of this guide**

This guide has a *non-prescriptive approach*. It does not pretend to supply prescriptions and ready-made solutions for any situations. It functions as a *reminder service*, reminding of things to be considered at every phase. It is meant to be a *friendly interface*. The use of academic language and professional jargon that is often found in works of reference is avoided here. However, terms that have become widely accepted have been included with an explanation. The references aim to equip the reader with arguments and evidence to combat inaccurate myths, such as the myth that one can cause panic by providing the public with information. Readers interested in references and further research-based recommendations will be able to find them in the endnotes

## Overarching values

The development of this guidebook has been inspired by these primary values:

### *1. The public as the ultimate priority*

The highest goal of any crisis communication effort is the public welfare – not promoting the image of the communication manager’s organisation or pleasing the media, as is often the case in ordinary times. The public is the ultimate recipient of the communication, the purpose of which is to enable survival of the crisis with the least damage.<sup>6</sup> The public is also the highest criterion for the success or failure of crisis communication efforts. The centrality of the public, its perceptions and needs, should guide every action taken in any phase of a crisis. Hence, we gave priority to practices that addressed the following criteria: they emphasize vital information that may reduce casualties and injuries, strengthen public resilience, urge the recovery from the crisis, and take into consideration different sub-audiences that otherwise might be neglected. Furthermore, the structure of the chapters in this guidebook is lead by this principle, as each phase of a crisis begins with an observation regarding the public and its characteristics and needs in that phase, and it is from these issues that the recommended actions and ways of handling the public’s perceptions, preferences and needs are derived.

### *2. Generalization as a reference point for specific events*

No two crises are alike – each is unique. While this guidebook makes an effort to point out the commonalities between the various types of crisis that endanger human lives, it is no replacement for a detailed communication plan designed for the specific types of events an organisation is likely to face. It is our intention to help crisis communication managers reach that stage and form their own plan, which, as will become apparent, will require substantial modifications.

### *3. Key figures – crisis communication managers*

The guidebook sees public agency crisis communication managers as the key figures in the process of building high professional and ethical standards of crisis communication. It is true that others – for example, journalists and the news organisations that employ them – also have an important role to play in this process. Nonetheless, crisis communication managers enjoy a strategic positioning that enables them to exert the most important influence, by virtue of the combination of their organisational affiliation, professional outlook, communication skills, knowledge and access to experts in the domain of the crisis.

### *4. Involving communication managers in decision-making processes*

Involving those in charge of communication in decision-making processes is essential, even in ordinary times, as part of the bidirectional, two-way

symmetrical communication with the public.<sup>7</sup> During crises, communication managers' involvement becomes even more essential, as they embody a critical link connecting the organisation's policy makers and administration with the public.<sup>8</sup> Only when they are present among decision makers and participate in the decision-making process, can they fulfil their dual function of representing the organisation for the public and vice versa. This, in turn, enables them to participate in a tangible way in the rescue efforts and in the protection of human lives. The practice whereby the administration makes all the decisions and "informs" the communication specialists after the fact is outdated can be harmful for both the organisation and the public.

#### *5. The media are indispensable, but should not be the only communication channel*

Its shortcomings notwithstanding, and despite the development of the alternative communication channels that allow direct communication with the public, the media have retained their pivotal role in crises. Mass media channels make it possible to communicate with large groups of citizens, allow journalists to ask questions, and help the public analyze the situation so as to make informed decisions.<sup>9</sup> However, it is also important to make use of the ever-increasing supply of channels that bypass the media and reach the public directly, such as personal messages, alarms and sirens, the organisation's website, and direct and social networks. These channels may allow immediate updates, bypassing the selection and bias that sometimes characterize messages mediated by the news industry. Direct channels, such as the distribution of leaflets or the employment of a public address (PA) system can become extremely important during mass disasters such as earthquakes, which involve a collapse of the communication infrastructure. Under such circumstances, these can be the only reliable channels for communication with the public.

#### *6. Collaborating with other agencies*

Because crises are by nature systemic and involve various organisations, effective communication in crises cannot be the project of a single organisation; rather, it requires close collaboration and coordination between organisations and their communication managers. Cooperation of this kind has an added value, enhancing the consistency of key messages and increasing the efficacy of the division of labour between the parties. Poor communication and lack of coordination, on the other hand, open the door to contradictions between messages and exchange of blame, which may interfere with the public's trust and e.g. reduce its willingness to follow the safety instructions.

#### *7. Avoiding common pitfalls*

The research literature points out a number of common errors concerning public information during a crisis. These errors include double or

contradictory messages from various expert sources, delayed release of information, over-reassuring messages, recommendations that are not based on reality testing, failure to dispel rumours or myths, power struggles, inefficiency and the use of inappropriate humour.<sup>10</sup> The best way of averting these and other errors is to learn about them and to avoid exclusive reliance on one's experience, intuition or unexamined beliefs.

#### 8. *Crisis as a circular phenomenon*

It is customary to think of a crisis as a circular phenomenon, or a spiral movement, in which the end of one crisis signals the beginning of the learning process that can help prepare for the next.<sup>11</sup> The moment the crisis is over, the preparations, thinking, planning, resource allocation, practising and other crisis preparedness-related activities begin anew. This circular view forces us to see a crisis as an integral part of the organisation's routine ongoing activity. In line with this idea, any message can be viewed as a circular learning process: did it reach its destination? Was it publicized? Was it understood properly? If not, how can this be corrected in the next version or update?

#### **Crisis life cycles**

In the past, experts saw a crisis as "bad news": a surprising and threatening event that the authorities had to mitigate and bring to an end. Today, however, following the newer research and paradigm change, a crisis is viewed as a more complex process, coping with which requires, primarily, understanding of the full context within which it is unfolding, including its conditions, unique characteristics and consequences. In addition, contemporary approaches also view crises as carrying a potential for positive change – for example, a crisis may bring about needed reforms that might not occur otherwise.

The present chapter deals with crises that endanger human lives, such as natural and man-made disasters, epidemics, terror, wars and so forth. This focus brings us close to the neighbouring concepts of *disaster*<sup>12</sup>, *emergency*<sup>13</sup> and *catastrophe*<sup>14</sup>, which are typically used to describe more severe situations.

The main characteristics of a crisis are as follows<sup>15</sup>:

- There exists a high level of threat, the need to make decisions within a short timeframe and a general sense of urgency.
- Some of the people who have been directly hurt by the crisis feel unable to cope.
- The event is accompanied by situations that are fluid, unstable and dynamic.
- From the perspective of the organisations involved, the crisis represents a turning point that, be it positive or negative, is unavoidable. It has the power to bring about changes in the organisational structure and work

routines. It can even strengthen or weaken the organisation's survival instinct.

It is customary to divide a crisis into several distinct phases. Some propose three phases, while others suggest five or even six. All the divisions recognize the distinctions between the three basic states: before, during and after the crisis<sup>16</sup>. Each phase has its own challenges, demands and needs, which are manifested, among other things, in the area of communication. Here five phases are distinguished, as follows:

### **1. Preparation (Prediction, preparedness and mitigation)**

This is the most comprehensive and decisive preparation phase. It takes place when everything is still routine and the possibility of the crisis may seem remote. The challenges in this phase are, first of all, to mobilize all the agents and means for identifying the likely scenarios and studying them. The second is getting to know the population and the most effective ways for communicating with it, mobilizing the public for self-defence, increasing its awareness of the potential crisis, and coordinating expectations about the ways in which the public authorities can help and those in which self reliance is needed. The third challenge is to develop a comprehensive plan for a communication strategy which will include the organisational and inter-organisational infrastructure and the human and technological resources required. The fourth is to engage in activities that will enhance the preparedness of the population and organisation, including periodic training and drills, educational campaigns, and the ongoing testing of messages and their effectiveness.

### **2. Warning**

In many, though definitely not all crises, a specific threat expectancy period that lasts from the moment an approaching threat is identified until that threat materializes and becomes a crisis, or alternatively – gradually dying out and disappearing. In all other situations, this phase will not appear at all; rather the crisis will erupt without further warning.

Therefore, if the warning phase does appear, the first challenge is to utilize fully this precious and sometimes brief period, motivating the public to take the proper measures – this time, under the shadow of the approaching threat, which might increase the public's motivation to prepare itself properly. In order to do this a realistic and updated picture regarding the nature and scope of the threat needs to be delivered and the public's memory refreshed regarding the safety instructions. The second challenge is to carefully review, update and prepare all the steps that are required during the next phase, the emergency, particularly all those which concern the alerts regarding its eruption and the required responses. Media outlets, which in this phase will tend to devote significant coverage to the threat – at times around the clock – are likely to assist in this task.

### **3. Crisis Response (Emergency)**

This is the core phase, in which the crisis actually breaks. The main challenge of crisis communication managers is to mobilize themselves for the task of saving lives, to motivate the public to take specific actions for self protection and assist the rescue operations, and to help minimize damage and uphold public resilience. This can be achieved by listening carefully to the ways in which various groups in society perceive the crisis, by identifying their needs for information and empathy, and by efforts to meet these needs as fully as possible, among other channels by connecting to the leadership and social networks. This phase is the ultimate test of the organisation's capacities, first and foremost the extent to which it is able to understand the crisis and its significance appropriately, and to manage it skilfully. The organisation must combine its readiness and preparedness with resourcefulness, creativity, sensitivity and the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

### **4. Reconstruction (Recovery)**

The crisis has just ended. Some people may have lost their lives, while others may have suffered physical, mental or financial damage. This is the time for physical and mental recovery on the way back to routine. The first challenge is to assist the immediate recovery and help society get back on track, to participate in the recovery of the damaged region and reinforce the resilience of society as a whole. Some crises require long-term relief and recovery, which presents a challenge in itself. The second challenge is to improve preparedness for similar future events, while utilizing the freshness of participants' experiences and memories, as well as accessibility to information, people and evidence, for comprehensive data collection that will allow for honest, thorough and courageous organisational lesson learning. It is essential to avoid falling into exchanges of blame, which is unfortunately, what tends to happen after some crises. Information gathering must be done quickly, with the understanding that some of the follow-up – data analysis, conclusion drawing and preparing for similar crises in the future – may get postponed until the next phase.

### **5. Evaluation**

In this phase, the damaged areas should be thoroughly rehabilitated. The main challenges in this phase are to conclude learning the lessons based on the data collected in the former phase, to implement the required changes in a determined and systematic manner, and prepare for future crises accordingly. This phase embodies the beneficial aspects of the crisis, as it is the opportunity for structural reforms, budget reallocations and rebuilding of the affected regions in a way that does not merely recreate their prior conditions, but actually improves their state. The main challenge during this phase is to implement decisively and systematically the changes and tasks that were defined and prepare for future crises.

For each crisis phase, the focus is on three main stakeholder groups:

**1. Citizens** – Made up of people with different needs, will always be featured in the first stakeholder group, to emphasize its being the ultimate addressee of all crisis communication. The public's perceptions, needs and preferences are the base which supports all the other aspects.

**2. News Media** – For the second stakeholder group the role of mass communication channels is addressed – radio, television, Internet and press – that constitute the primary means by which information is disseminated to the public.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the role of the direct communication channels is discussed, such as social networks or organisational websites, whose importance increases at times of crisis.<sup>18</sup>

**3. Response organisation and network** – The third stakeholder group concerns organisations that deploy crisis communication managers as well as other organisations that are also involved in managing the crisis. These are likely to have a significant impact on the crisis policy, resources, means and priorities, which in turn may have an indirect impact on the communicative aspects of the crisis.

# Crisis Communication Guide for Public Organisations

## PHASE 1 Preparation (Prediction, Preparedness and Mitigation)

This is the most comprehensive and decisive preparation phase, also known as "the golden hour". It takes place when everything is still routine and the possibility of the crisis may seem remote. The challenges in this phase are, first of all, to mobilize all the agents and means for identifying the likely scenarios and studying them. The second is getting to know the population and the most effective ways for communicating with it, mobilizing the public for self-defence, increasing its awareness of the potential crisis, and coordinating expectations about the ways in which the public authorities can help and those in which self-reliance is needed. The third challenge is to develop a comprehensive plan for a communication strategy which will include the organisational and inter-organisational infrastructure and the human and technological resources required. The fourth is to engage in activities that will enhance the preparedness of the population and organisation, including periodic training and drills, educational campaigns, and the ongoing testing of messages and their effectiveness.

### 1.1 Citizens

- To be effective, crisis communication needs to be based on an in-depth understanding of the relevant public, the mosaic of the various populations that make it up and their perceptions, needs, preferences and communication habits, during both the crisis and pre-crisis. Extra attention should be paid to populations with special needs: people with disabilities, immigrants, foreign language speakers, socioeconomically vulnerable groups, sick or medicated people and so forth. <sup>19</sup>
- Knowing the public also means knowing its information gaps and false perceptions regarding the nature of the crisis and the behaviour required throughout it. For example, before the launch of a vaccination campaign against an epidemic disease, the organisation must first learn what false perceptions are prevalent among different publics, such as those who resist vaccination "ideologically", in order to try to convince them of the importance of having the vaccination.
- Learning about the population has to be carried out in as systematic a way as possible. Relying on intuition, or on acquaintance with a selection of salient "characters" in the population, or reading online user's comments, are all questionable methods. The following can serve as better information sources:
  - Social science research, such as surveys or interviews.

- Existing data obtained by agencies specializing in statistical data gathering on demographics and social issues (national bureau of statistics, local government planning departments, academic centres and research institutes).
  - Population researchers, psychologists specializing in crisis management and regional trauma centre directors.
  - Compilations of questions addressed by the public to the organisation's information centre during a similar past crisis are one example of a valuable source that may be found in the organisation's archives or in the memory of its former employees.
  - Case studies of similar crises handled by other organisations, including in other countries.
- Population research should ideally encompass three levels:
    - The physical level: understanding the residents' basic needs, such as food and shelter.
    - The psycho-social level: understanding the citizens' psychological and social needs, such as the need for family and community support in times of crisis.
    - The interpretative level: understanding the ways in which individuals from various cultural, social and economic groups process messages and information.<sup>20</sup>
  - Though it may seem that only the interpretative level is directly related to crisis communication managers, the second and third levels may also contribute in a significant way to the effectiveness of their messages, as they supply a wider context for understanding the population and its needs.
  - The preparedness phase research should try to obtain information related to the public's understanding and behaviour: the extent to which individuals know about the crisis and understand the risk factors involved. If any messages on this topic have been disseminated, there is a need to examine the participants' level of exposure to these, their ability to comprehend and remember them, whether they trust the instructions to be useful and whether they plan to follow these and other instructions issued by the authorities. Trust is the key to mobilizing the public to engage in the self-protective activities.<sup>21</sup>
  - It is important to identify the most effective channels for communicating with each population group during a crisis. However, the patterns of media consumption tend to change when the crisis sets in. Hence, it is vital to analyze media consumption during former crises and be alert to the shifting efficiency of each channel according to factors such as time of the day, workdays and weekends and seasonal differences. There is also a need to get to know the pre-

crisis patterns of media consumption, for conducting drills and educational and awareness-raising campaigns to improve preparedness.

- It is important to identify the audience, the most effective communication channels and the languages into which every message will be translated. These languages need to be determined in a systematic manner, based on unified criteria that will be binding for every platform and every organisation that communicates with the public during the crisis. The public includes, among others, the various relevant stakeholders: the specific public that is situated in the area that might be affected by the crisis or disaster, their family members, rescue teams and their families, government officials, employers, religious, political and community leaders, the international community and so forth. <sup>22</sup>
- This is the phase for selecting the most effective speakers who will be in charge of bringing the organisation's messages to the public: the organisation's leaders, the spokesperson, professional experts (such as epidemiologists or seismologists), or perhaps a cooperative communications team. <sup>23</sup> In crises which involve professional issues, such as medical or hazardous materials aspects, professional experts who are interviewed in the media can do a more effective job than ordinary spokespersons and politicians, being perceived by the public as more authoritative and credible. The next step is to establish the training format for crisis communication managers, in both communications issues and professional issues pertaining to the crisis (such as communicativeness or standing in front of a camera). Periodical training is essential to ensure that they are competent and up to date.
- Regular and ongoing communication with the public, which begins pre-crisis, can help facilitate efficient communication in the emergency phase, by which time the organisation and its spokespersons will have already established rapport and public credibility.

## 1.2 Planning

- Specific planning for each envisioned scenario is the most effective approach. Where it is not possible for an organisation to cover all the scenarios – for example, due to the excessive number of possible scenarios and prohibitive costs – the focus should be put on the most crucial scenarios based on considerations such as the prevailing national strategy and the probabilities and risks associated with each crisis.
- The planning process necessitates partnership between all the relevant agents: administrators, rescue agencies, professionals and crisis communication specialists, in order to ensure integration, cooperation, coordination and multidirectional information flow. This process also helps ensure that communication management is bound to the overarching goals of the organisation, particularly the goal of saving lives, instead of remaining preoccupied with the issue of image. If the need arises, it may be

advisable also to involve representatives of other organisations that are likely to take part in handling the event. In times of crisis, leadership – organisational, local and even national – is of enormous importance for communicating with the public. Crisis communication managers do not always have a practical opportunity to utilize this resource, particularly with respect to higher-ranking officials; however they should be aware at least of its importance and do what they can to engage the relevant figures.

- During crises, communication managers are required to supply three types of communication: practical instructions for the public (do's and don'ts), public information (what happened, what is expected to happen); and messages (for support and self-control). When formulating media messages related to crises, the following issues need to be considered:
  - The possibility of bringing the messages to the public at various levels of uniformity, according to needs and circumstances: <sup>24</sup>
    - Highly uniform strategy – using shared overarching messages and a minimal number of speakers, so as to achieve a consensus. This approach, called SWOV (Speaking with One Voice), is suitable for relatively homogeneous societies. Sometimes, the phrase "uniform" is exaggerated, and it is more realistic to aspire to a high level of coordination, while taking into consideration the various factors and groups that act in the same sphere each with its organisational voice, priorities and emphases.
    - Highly diverse strategy -- addressing various audiences within the society in their own language, with a different speaker addressing each group. This approach, called SWMV (Speaking with Multiple Voices), is suitable for relatively heterogeneous societies. It requires more alertness and coordination in order to avoid contradictions. A diverse strategy is also required when there is no agreement among experts regarding the extent of the risk and the required self-protection measures.
  - It is important to fight the all-too-natural temptation to phrase messages in such a way that they blur the existence of the direct, concrete threat, making it sound abstract. Research has demonstrated that a sense of clear and present danger can mobilize the public to take the required preparedness steps.
  - For the public to comprehend the goals and usefulness of messages, they need to be embedded in practical steps to be taken for self-protection or to minimize risks.
  - Messages should remain simple and clear and be easy for foreign language speakers to understand. Overwhelming the public with too much information should be avoided.

- Messages are to generate in the public a sense of self-efficacy – that is, of having the requisite skills, learning ability and resilience for coping with the crisis. Having developed this sense will enable the public to function well and to reduce its dependence on the authorities.
- Truth is always best <sup>25</sup> – in any phase and in any situation. Credibility is a precondition for the public to take communication managers' instructions seriously. An organisation that has been caught spinning lies will lose its credibility – and with that, its ability to handle the crisis.
- Transparency and openness are essential. It is vital to give the public the information that is required for understanding the threat and the ways of coping with it, and not to withhold relevant information on grounds that are not well founded – e.g., the concern about provoking panic. Distributing information in the preparedness phase increases awareness and motivates the public to action. Openness means 1) keeping the organisation accessible to the media, 2) willingness to share information, and 3) honest messages. <sup>26</sup>
- It is important to make it clear that an early warning is not possible in every crisis <sup>27</sup>, and that is why preparedness needs to be ongoing.
- In all phases, messages should be issued repeatedly, on both the same and parallel channels. <sup>28</sup> Repetition has many benefits: it allows effective distribution of the information to populations who have missed a certain broadcast or news edition; it makes it possible to reach risk groups, which may change as the crisis unfolds; it enhances the ability to absorb new information, which may temporarily be impaired during crises, and the ability to remember messages, which differs from person to person; it raises the perceived trustworthiness and importance of the information. <sup>29</sup> At the same time, repetitiveness has the potential to bore and repel the public. Hence, it is important to look for creative ways to repeat the same messages. <sup>30</sup>
- More effective strategies for delivering messages include making use of non verbal tools, initiation of media events and unexpected choice of spokespersons. A media event can be initiated during which community leaders themselves set a personal example to the public, such as taking a vaccination or exploring a damaged region and encouraging survivors' resilience. Sometimes, figures such as political and religious leaders, experts in epidemiology or hazardous materials and celebrities can be of greater benefit than customary spokespersons.
- Has the message been delivered to the public? This is not the end of the process – just the beginning. Now it is time to assess whether the message has indeed reached all the relevant populations, has been understood properly and has mobilized them to take the required steps. It is important

to remember that information- seeking habits during times of crisis vary so widely that no one has the ability to foresee them on the basis of intuition alone.<sup>31</sup> Studies which investigated information seeking patterns and the channels used in times of disaster showed significant differences between citizens according to gender, race, socioeconomic status, prior exposure to disasters and, to some extent, psychological proximity to the event. Intuition would not have been able to produce these insights.<sup>32</sup>

- Preparedness for crisis communication begins with sober assessment of the crisis and its meanings, shaping the communication strategy to be employed and preparing the groundwork in terms of personnel, knowledge, procedures, instruments and techniques of communication management in times of crisis. At this stage one should find out what kind of resources, such as communication technologies and other types of equipment, may be required to enable effective communication with your different audiences, including journalists, other organisations and the public at large. When a crisis occurs, it might be too late to start realizing your needs, let alone acquiring missing resources in due time.
- Communication managers should ensure that their activities are carefully documented for subsequent conclusion drawing. Effective learning processes require accessible information regarding managers' decision-making procedures, meeting protocols, incident logs, records of messages that have been distributed and published, calls received at the information centre, and any other information worth analyzing for the purposes of learning lessons.
- Communication managers should adopt a culture of measuring their readiness and how well their planning matches the public's actual learning from the messages sent and drills practised. Although crisis readiness is far from being an exact science and despite the fact that some of the people involved in this field will not be excited about the idea, measurements can help in assessing preparedness, whether plans and goals match and the suitability of messages for the various publics. Large parts of the preparedness activities are measurable; examples include the percentage of the public who have been exposed to the self-defence instructions and intend to follow them, the percentage of the training activities for the organisation's spokespersons that has been completed, rate of progress of carrying out emergency preparations and the learning efficiency level, determined by internal tests in the organisation.
- It is important to monitor the media regularly and analyze systematically and longitudinally how the organisation is represented, to identify bottlenecks in the message delivery and map out the types of messages that the media tend to subject to undesirable changes.

### 1.3 Communications

- The list of channels that are available to crisis communication managers before, during and after a crisis, is long, including mass media and direct channels that enable non mediated communication with the public. Obviously, the variety of available channels will change over the years; however, what remains constant is the core question that needs to guide crisis communication planners: by utilizing the existing variety of channels, how well is each target population covered? The different communication channels and their reach to the primary population segments should be mapped systematically before a crisis occurs. Channels should be selected according to their compatibility with the nature of the crisis, the relevant publics, budget and circumstances. This is also the time to make proper preparations for each channel and drill it, so in time of crisis it will serve as planned. Apart from the mass media, which will be detailed later, some channels to consider are the following:

- **Annual drill that involves the public** – A drill in which the public actually performs practical self-defence measures is the most effective way of improving crisis preparedness.<sup>33</sup> A drill like this cannot be carried out for each scenario, but only for the most salient and prolonged core scenario. The results of the drill enable assessment of the public's preparedness and point out where improvements are warranted.<sup>34</sup> Allowing for the involvement of the rescue forces and the public in its natural habitat (home, workplace, school and entertainment venues), this drill is an instrument for efficient learning and consciousness raising, particularly when accompanied by the following item.
- **Media campaigns** – Media campaigns, which involve advertising, news coverage and social networks etc., can help raise various populations' awareness of particular risk factors and ways of dealing with them.<sup>35</sup> Combining a major annual drill with a broad-based media campaign and the accompanying social activities can help cultivate a national culture of preparedness. In media campaigns, it is important to focus on ways to motivate the public to deal with threats by taking practical actions.
- **Pre-packaged campaign** – A ready-to-use corpus of messages that is meant for optimal coping with a sudden and complex scenario that requires an immediate reaction with a minimal error margin. The messages are kept ready, having been approved by all relevant decision makers, and may include educational films, broadcasts, brochures, slogans and handouts. If possible, these pre-packages campaign messages should be exposed to control groups of citizens for criticism. It is important to try to locate misunderstood instructions, unfamiliar terms, problematic wording which may generate mistrust or deterrence. Group meetings with citizens may help the crisis communication manager learn whether certain reactions characterize specific individuals or wider groups. It is important to ascertain before their

distribution that messages do indeed match the characteristics of the crisis that is happening and perform last-moment adjustments.

- **Instructing grade schools students** – Enables the raising of crisis awareness among the younger generation. Children are effective and accessible agents for change: not only are they more open to change their own behaviour, but, they can also encourage the rest of the family to prepare for a crisis. Other agents of change who are capable of motivating the public to higher awareness include political leaders, celebrities, social workers and teachers, and in certain communities, religious leaders.
- **Dedicated radio and television channels** – crisis communication managers should consider whether the crises for which their organisation is preparing itself and the resources available for that purpose justify establishing and operating special radio and television channels wholly dedicated to crisis broadcasts. These may be particularly efficient in severe crises, or as a complementary communication channel for instructing the public. On the one hand, this may allow direct use of a channel that suits the public's preference for radio and TV during crises, without interference from the media. On the other hand, such channels also have more than a few disadvantages, of which the most salient is their high cost in terms both of budget and the preparations that need to be made – equipment, studio teams, announcers in various languages, demos etc. Another disadvantage is that in order to make use of these channels, the public is required to change its media consumption habits, which may be radically different from those in ordinary times. If it is decided to operate a dedicated studio of this kind, investment in a comprehensive effort will be required, in order to learn how to maximize its utility during the different phases of the crisis. Most organisations around the world tend to avoid operating such channels, making do instead with interrupting broadcasts on regular channels and broadcasting life-saving messages.
- **Life-saving emergency announcements** – Calling on the public to take immediate steps for self-protection requires early coordination and scrupulous joint planning with the relevant radio and television stations.<sup>36</sup> The ability to broadcast, particularly on television, an emergency message – whether textual, auditory or visual – requires detailed agreements, which involve, inter alia, editorial, legal, and technological issues. In urgent crises, broadcasting stations can be equipped, ahead of time, with films and pre-packaged campaign materials, and designated representatives of the organisation who will step into the studio in time of emergency.
- **Warning and alarm signals** – During crises that require the public to engage in urgent self-protective acts, it is impossible to rely exclusively on the media. Special alarm signals and/or urgent warning messages can cover large areas immediately and effectively; however they require a combination of technological means, operational skills and communicational preparedness.

It is important for the public to understand the meaning of each signal and know exactly what it is instructing them to do. It is important to avoid introducing a confusing multitude of alarms and warnings designed for a range of different situations. Warning messages should be integrated into a large communication system to improve and back up the effectiveness of their dissemination. For example, broadcast media can be used for voicing alarms in real time in regions where they may be difficult to hear for technical reasons. Pagers are also a complimentary means for areas that are not effectively covered by alarms, as well as for specific disabled populations, such as the hearing disabled. It is important to routinely inspect the functioning of these systems, including their reliability and breadth of coverage.

- **Website** – The organisation’s website can serve as an effective and economical channel for delivering messages suited to different populations. It may contain options to interact with the organisation, forums for asking questions, and the use of multimedia for instructing different publics in different languages. The website can establish dedicated spaces for children that are based on experiential learning, a function that enables enlarging fonts for the visually disabled and textual messages for the hearing disabled.<sup>37</sup> In complex and ongoing crises that require it, it is worth considering the building of a dedicated website, which will assemble all the information that it is essential for the public to know. This may include self-protection measures, a guide for those who have been harmed, options for assistance, property compensation procedures, crisis laws for employers, and channels of communication with the crisis service centre, governmental and non-for-profit organisations that supply assistance etc. Such a website not only suggests non-mediated assistance, but also provides an accessible channel of communication, presence and service. This option is recommended, because it allows the public and the organisation to focus on the crisis, provides a sense of being up-to-date, and supplies detailed answers to questions relating to the crisis. The regular website, by contrast, may contain materials that are outdated, not related to the crisis or do not match the crisis atmosphere. It is important to remember, however, that certain populations, such as the elderly and immigrants, may be slow in adopting new technologies.
- **Emergency call centre** – It is important to establish an emergency call centre or be prepared to do so quickly once the crisis sets in. The public should be enabled to contact the centre through a variety of means: phone, Internet, instant messages or social media. Establishing an emergency call centre has a soothing effect on the public, who now know that they have an address to turn to with their questions. The centre should be operated by well-trained staff including speakers of the relevant languages. Calls and questions should be analyzed in an orderly fashion, and the most frequent publicized, along with comprehensive answers, on the website. The most frequent

questions should be highlighted. An updated directory of questions the public is worried about is an effective tool for improving preparedness.<sup>38</sup> The emergency call centre itself should be located in the area where the impending crisis is not likely to interfere with its work. For crisis with a regional character, where the communication infrastructure may cease to work, it might be worthwhile adding regional information centres that will provide residents with information on basic services, such as medical treatment, shelters, water and food supplies and information relating to those injured: a list of hospitals taking care of victims, emergency evacuation points and cemeteries. These centres, too, have the dual function of both distributing and collecting information about the public and its physical and informational needs.

- **Communication centre** – It should be considered whether opening a communication centre would be helpful for the press corps when they arrive to cover a particular crisis. In unusual and large-scale crises, these may include the foreign press. In the communication centre, journalists, crisis managers and communication managers can interact and exchange information in a non-mediated manner, and messages can be disseminated efficiently. Establishing a communication centre requires pre-crisis preparations, including the finding of suitable locations, preparing the infrastructure, training and sometimes even planning basic accommodation arrangements for the press corps.
- **New Media** – It is important for communication managers to make themselves familiar with the new types of communication channels and their ability to assist them in communicating – particularly with target populations who are not easily reached through the traditional channels. Cell phone companies can help by passing on alarm signals to their customers, pager companies can reach people who are hard of hearing or out of range, and telephone blast services can provide ways of contacting large populations in regions without effective local broadcast media. Additionally, social networks can be used to contact their members<sup>39</sup>, and instant messaging systems, such as SMS, can be of use in updating the organisation's headquarters or other organisations' staff. The latter can also serve in the performing the task described below.
- **Radio and television sets** – Locations where large concentrations of residents may form, such as public bomb shelters, temporary housing and schools, should be mapped and prepared for equipping with relevant devices (television, radio or internet platform, according to circumstances and budget) so that residents can receive updates while they are there.

#### 1.4 The news media

- In times of crisis and emergency, media consumption habits and the functioning of certain media channels undergo substantial change. Typically, television and radio become the most widely used information sources during emergencies.<sup>40</sup> The radio has an especially essential role: it is available even to people who stay outside their homes, does not require mains voltage and overcomes distance constraints easily. Newspapers, in turn, are easy to distribute in regions without electricity, with the addition of inserts and pamphlets with detailed information and instructions. However, the effectiveness of newspapers as a source of information diminishes due to limitations of timeliness and the actual circulation among different target groups. Despite this, newspapers regain their effectiveness later on, particularly in the post-crisis phase, when conclusions are drawn, providing in-depth information.
- In a local-regional crisis – and most crises are as such – despite the natural appeal of the national media, the local and regional media should not be neglected or ignored. Local or regional media better correspond with the needs of potentially affected communities, as they are more willing than the national media to deal with everyday practical issues and preparedness on the local level; the national media, on the other hand, will be less interested in a local crisis, especially in the pre- and post-crisis phases.
- "Exclusive" does not apply during crises<sup>41</sup> – not even for renowned reporters. As far as possible, all the information should be available to everybody. At least in situations where human lives are in danger, the public deserves to receive comprehensive information through all the available channels, free of the distortions of competition that exist between media outlets during ordinary times. Suspending exclusivity does not mean, however, that certain channels should not be favoured where this can be justified on the basis of the information distribution needs, such as effective display of audiovisual instructions, reach of the largest audiences, or coverage of certain populations and regions.
- Crisis communication managers should personally meet the relevant reporters and their editors and directors and try to lay a foundation for a long-term working relationship and mutual trust. Journalists should be briefed about the risks to public safety during potential crises and how these can be mitigated by effective crisis communication. More specifically, they should be advised how they can help in delivering life-saving messages. Relationships with them should be periodically maintained. In crises, these relationships may allow greater openness to managers' messages and greater ability to fix problems quickly and efficiently. Background information files and briefings for reporters should be prepared that may be "parachuted" into the field during emergencies, as "reinforcement" to the teams that regularly cover these areas. This will help minimize delays, disruptions, and heavy editing of life-saving

instructions. In addition, it is important to remember that the press corps – reporters, technical staffs, photographers, editors and anchors – are all human beings with fears, anxieties and concerns. A newscaster who is concerned about his or her family cannot be expected to provide coherent and calming messages. Therefore, it is important to meet with the press corps, guide them and integrate them into the preparations for the crisis.

- Potential key interviewees whose characteristics make them suitable to become the “face” or “voice” of the organisation in times of crisis should be identified. It may be useful to have a separate “face” or “voice” for each leading broadcast outlet. In this way, both parties will already be acquainted with each other by the time the interviewee steps into the studio during a crisis. The best choices for this role are those who may excel at effective communication with the public: individuals who are articulate and charismatic, have an authoritative appearance that evokes trust and possess the required experience and professional background. The selected individuals should be trained periodically, with an emphasis on the ability to phrase messages, deliver them to the public, repeat them, be focused, monitor their body language and be comfortable with the microphone and the camera. Additional interviewees should be prepared in case the media demand new faces.

### **1.5 Response organisation and network**

- It is important to map out the authorities that are going to be involved in crisis management. Those of them that are perceived by the public as the most credible are usually the best candidates for communicative cooperation. Crisis communication managers from the organisations involved should coordinate their work; they should be acquainted with their respective procedures and working patterns, and rehearse working jointly. Shared headquarters should be agreed on where communication specialists from all the relevant organisations can be represented. Getting to know each other, coordination and mutual trust between the different organisations and their crisis communication managers as well as clear division of responsibility among them will reduce the risks of mutual blame and evasion of responsibility during the crisis.
- The public information system should be tested periodically at regular intervals to identify glitches and areas that need improvement. From time to time, joint exercises should be conducted with the partner organisations and their crisis communication staffs and, if at all possible (there may be resistance on their part), with the journalists who cover them, to identify bottlenecks and various disruptions in the information flow.
- A suitable infrastructure should be prepared for intra- and inter-organisational communication which will enable those in charge of crisis communication and other decision makers to communicate with each other in a timely manner, give and receive updates confidentially, and minimize interferences with their work.

This infrastructure is intended to facilitate the delivery and reception of urgent messages, tracking relevant events and following up with the outgoing information and published final versions. If a number of different departments are authorized to release information to the media, it is important that all the announcements be pre-approved by one official, who is assigned this role ahead of time.

- An agreed glossary of terms should be established for use both within the organisation and between the partner organisations involved in managing the crisis. A unified glossary allows everyone to speak with the same language, increasing unity and consistency in communicating with the public. The glossary should make minimal use of professional jargon and be understood correctly by the public. This may require constant awareness toward the tendencies of certain terms to carry more than one “correct” interpretation among different audiences. The same terms should be used on the organisational website and in educational campaigns.
- During a crisis, the crisis communication team will need reinforcement, due to the heavy workloads that are to be expected when working simultaneously on various fronts. Creative ways to get such reinforcements can be found using the following resources:
  - **Regional spokespersons** whose region has not been affected by the crisis. Advantages: their knowledge of the field, the organisation and at least some of the media, as well as their being up to date by virtue of their earlier participation in the organisation’s drills.
  - **Past spokespersons with the organisation who** may be mobilized in times of crisis or other organisations’ spokespersons who are as close as possible to the field and with whom the crisis communication manager has made mutual support arrangements. Disadvantages: these are outsiders; involving them may be more complex as they require periodic training and participation in drills; at the critical moment, their other commitments may interfere with their ability to serve.
  - **Other staff from within the organisation.** Advantages: they know the organisation, are trained and are up to date. Disadvantages: they may lack background in communications and hence require intensive training. An alternative option is to appoint “communication trustees” from various departments in the organisation who will coordinate incoming information for updating crisis communication teams and conduct focused research, elucidating specific questions the communication teams may encounter.

The organisation’s own employees and their preparation for possible crises should not be forgotten. They are members of the community and are probably also consumers of their own organisation’s services. Analysis of the organisation’s workforce can help realistic estimation of the proportions of

staffs who are going to be available during the crisis or absent for various reasons, to mobilize them for planning and brainstorming, and recruit them to a social network for effective communicating with

## **PHASE 2 Warning**

In many, though definitely not all crises, a specific threat expectancy period that lasts from the moment an approaching threat is identified until that threat materializes and becomes a crisis, or alternatively – gradually dying out and disappearing. In all other situations, this phase will not appear at all; rather the crisis will erupt without further warning. Therefore, if the warning phase does appear, the first challenge is to utilize fully this precious and sometimes brief period, motivating the public to take the proper measures – this time, under the shadow of the approaching threat, which might increase the public's motivation to prepare itself properly. In order to do this a realistic and updated picture regarding the nature and scope of the threat needs to be delivered, and the public's memory refreshed regarding the safety instructions. The second challenge is to carefully review, update and prepare all the steps that are required during the next phase, the emergency, particularly all those which concern the alerts regarding its eruption and the required responses. Media outlets, which in this phase will tend to devote significant coverage to the threat – at times around the clock –, are likely to assist in this task.

### **2.1 Citizens**

- This period is the last moment before the crisis itself to assess the public's readiness, sense of self-efficacy and trust in the authorities and their instructions. The warning phase is a critical period for establishing public trust in the authorities. On the one hand, success here can lay a firm foundation for the distribution of messages during the crisis; On the other hand, mistakes or faults at this stage, which damage trust, may be too late to repair during the crisis. It is important for communication managers to look for any information source that is likely to enrich their understanding of the public's attitudes, needs and preferences, while giving priority to systematic and scientifically well-founded information, such as population surveys. Information that is already available in the organisation, such as the emergency call centre's data, that can be subjected to systematic analysis, should not be neglected.
- The early warning phase can be utilized by choosing from the tools and human resources designated for the next phase – the crisis itself – those likely to be helpful in meeting the challenges of the present phase. This will help in forming a realistic picture regarding the nature and extent of the threat and educating the public about ways of preparing itself and the self-defence measures that will be required once the crisis breaks. Suitable professional experts <sup>42</sup> and direct media channels should be activated, including the

organisation's website and emergency call centre, which must be up to date and suited to the impending crisis.

- Messages in this phase should thoroughly cover the following issues: what exactly the citizens should be doing between this point and the onset of the crisis, what they should do the moment the crisis breaks, how they can protect themselves, and which agencies are available for assistance. Along with the various messages delivered to the public, emphasis should be placed on practical self-defence measures – personal or familial – that the public can take to minimize the risks.<sup>43</sup>
- When phrasing the messages, it is important to be aware that at least some members of the public are likely to feel stressed at this time. This emotional state may temporarily reduce some individuals' ability to absorb and process information in an independent and critical way, particularly when the information is new.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it is valuable to reiterate the instructions in various creative ways that emphasize and elaborate the same messages. As in the other phases, here too attention should be paid to the basic principles of phrasing announcements: simple and clear language; avoidance of professional jargon; precision and credibility.
- Ask the public that has been exposed to the information to pass it on personally to other people in their environment who may have missed it, not received it on time or have difficulties understanding it. They should be directed specifically to inform such populations as children, people with disabilities, seniors and those who may not speak the language, such as tourists, immigrants and foreign workers.
- The temptation should be resisted to gloss over the situation or voice excessive reassurances when there is room for worry.<sup>45</sup> Optimistic and overly reassuring information is likely to instil complacency that will prevent preparations being made. Mentioning unpleasant details should not be avoided and openness is recommended even when the information presents the organisation in a less than favourable light. The heightened attention and the fact that the crisis is now a specific one can be used to refresh the public's memory of the hands-on instructions and elucidate the steps that the organisation is taking.

## **2.2 The media**

- In this phase, with the crisis hanging in the air, journalists can be expected to contact communication managers with questions and demands, or possibly even budding accusations. In their dealings with them, managers should be prepared to act as follows:

- **Make the ongoing crisis management process visible to the media.** Make sure the organisation's representatives are available at all times for media contacts.
- **Avoid sacrificing precision and credibility for expediency's sake** - particularly in this phase, when the public and media are expecting news about the crisis onset. Make sure that only information that has been subjected to at least a preliminary verification process is publicized. When not one hundred percent sure that something is the case, state this, explaining that this is as much as is currently known. In addition, state what else is required to complement and support the existing data (lab results, additional investigation, damage control and so forth), and when the next update is expected. If, nevertheless, a false alarm has been given to the public, an immediate, open and reasoned explanation should be given, in order to minimize the damage to the organisation's trustworthiness.
- **Make sure to answer reporters' questions.** Avoid bargaining, evasions and "no comment" answers all of which may create an impression that there is something to hide.
- **Monitor closely the coverage and its updates,** so as to be able to correct errors and distortions of messages in real time.

**Monitor social media** (forums, user's comments, prominent blogs, social media, etc.) to find out how the public is discussing the crisis and what hitherto unconsidered questions, needs and information gaps are being raised

### 2.3 Direct means of communication

- Insofar as this applies to the crisis, special attention should be paid to devices for announcing the outbreak of the crisis such as siren and alert systems and making sure they are checked and ready for the next phase. Personnel should refresh their memories regarding their operating procedures and make sure that the public understands what each signal means and what action is to be performed upon receiving the alert.
- If understanding the crisis requires the delivery of substantial and detailed information, it may be worth summarizing it in a concise guidebook, with questions and answers, to be distributed in print or made available online - depending on the needs of the target populations and budget considerations.
- This is the phase, for organisations that have chosen this strategy in the first place, to replace their regular website with a special emergency one. The website should be operated in the mode of continuous, around-the-clock updating and maintenance. A site that is constantly updated, supplies useful information and provides answers to questions that bother the public is likely to become an essential information source that will attract a growing audience.

By contrast, a neglected website, which is not updated regularly and leaves questions unanswered, is likely to repel users and even damage the organisation's image. If it is decided to retain the regular website, information related to the crisis should be emphasized on the homepage. Updates should be provided regarding specific circumstances and educational materials, videos, and references to additional information and questions and answers posted, as well as translations of the information into the relevant foreign languages. Materials should also be provided that speak to diverse publics (children, citizens of high-risk regions, the disabled and foreign language speakers), allowing them easily to find information addressing their questions and needs in their own language during this phase.

## **2.4 Response organisation and network**

- This is last chance to ensure that the organisation is prepared and ready for the crisis, the nature of which is already known (at this point) (by now?). At this point the crisis phase procedures should be gone over, paragraph by paragraph, making sure that all the tools, people, messages, plans, practices, partnerships, pre-packaged campaigns and other matters required to be crisis-ready are in fact available and suited to the characteristics of the impending crisis. Last-minute adjustments can be made where necessary.
- Despite the crisis situation, it is important to hold regular meetings on all organisational levels. This is an important management and coordination tool, which enables managers to remain up to date as to what is happening in each department and improves departments' functioning, the coordination between them and organisational coherence.
- Collaboration with partner organisations is important, as the goals of all concerned are similar enough. Data should be exchanged regarding the public's expectations, with links to the other organisations' websites and cooperation on tools, instructions and recommendations for coping with the public's informational needs during the crisis.

It is important to be ready for situations in which the warning phase is prolonged or shortened, and for the possibility that at least certain collaborating organisations will attract accusations regarding their responsibility for the crisis.

## **PHASE 3 Crisis Response (Emergency)**

This is the core phase, at which the crisis actually breaks. The main challenge of crisis communication managers is to mobilize themselves for the task of saving lives, to motivate the public to take specific actions for self protection and assist

the rescue operations, and to help minimize damage and uphold public resilience. This can be achieved by listening carefully to the ways in which various groups in society perceive the crisis, by identifying their needs for information and empathy, and by efforts to meet these needs as fully as possible, among other channels by connecting to leadership and social networks. This phase is the ultimate test of the organisation's capacities, first and foremost the extent to which it is able to understand the crisis and its significance appropriately, and to manage it skilfully. The organisation must combine its readiness and preparedness with resourcefulness, creativity, sensitivity and the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

### **3.1 Citizens**

- When individuals or their loved ones are physically or psychologically hurt or have sustained damage to their property, and when others, too, feel threatened and unsafe, crisis communication managers have to focus on five main goals: distributing life-saving information; publicizing the requisite practical information about assistance and support services; strengthening public resilience; meeting the need for assertive and credible leadership; and assisting the population in making sense of the chaotic reality around them.
- Life-saving information consists primarily of the previously tested practical instructions that individuals and their families can immediately follow. The instructions provide responses to questions such as: Should we stay or go? Where is it safe to be? How can we cope with the crisis that has just struck? The information given out may include essentially different – sometimes even contradictory – instructions targeted at different publics. For example: populations close to the disaster area may be asked to evacuate while more distant ones are advised to protect themselves or stay at home and entrench themselves. This diversity of instructions requires very clear messages: who exactly should be evacuated, until when, at what range etc, accompanied by repetitions and emphasis to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.
- Useful information that the public often require in this phase concerns basic needs and crisis logistics – how, where and when it is possible to obtain medical treatment, water, food (including baby food), shelter, beds, medicine, cash and means of communication. Populations with special needs will require information about specific services and needs: the elderly might need information on medications; foreign language speakers will need explanations in their own language and disabled persons and their families may need special self-protection guidelines.
- Despite the early planning that has been done, it is important to stay flexible and be prepared to adapt messages and ways of delivering them to specific circumstances. This will require sensitivity, creativity and the capacity to improvise. For instance, if many of the victims speak a particular language, it is

important to ensure briefings are added in that language, easy access allowed to journalists who can speak it, and the emergency call centre staffed accordingly.

- It is important to understand the public's needs, be capable of representing it well in the decision-making processes and be able to supply it with the required information. Crisis communication managers need to clarify a series of questions related to the public's attitudes towards, needs and perceptions of the crisis: how the public is experiencing it, what, besides information, is needed and how well the public understands the instructions. Feedback from the public is essential also in order to learn about the absorption of messages and the level of trust in the authorities, which are crucial to social resilience. Without this information, the authorities cannot know whether and to what extent the public is convinced that the former are doing their best, despite the difficulties, and working effectively and with dedication to regain control and order, and has trust in them. The following are some of the channels that can be of help:
  - Public opinion surveys are the preferred channel, where conditions allow. Surveys not only help to map the range of attitudes, but also their distribution. If the crisis continues, it is recommended that a series of surveys be conducted with recurring questions, in order to identify changes and trends which can be used during the crisis as well as be subjected to a detailed analysis post-crisis. These surveys should deal with the public's physical needs, such as food, medical treatment and shelter; its social needs, such as staying in touch with family members who are far away; and its communications needs, such as additional informational on certain topics and on specific channels of communication. When surveys cannot be conducted, the following alternative tools should be considered:
    - Online surveys, interviews and focus groups can provide information on various attitudes that exist among the public, although not necessarily all of them and not their distribution.
    - Feedback supplied by different teams working in the disaster-stricken region or maintaining intensive contacts with the community.
    - Analysis of the information that accumulates at the emergency call centre will give insight into the public's perceptions of the crisis and provide up to date information on public questions and needs in real time.
    - Media monitoring, looking for the ways in which the media represents the public voice, sometimes using their own surveys.
    - Social media or different forms of user-generated content: in the absence of alternatives, monitoring social media contents, such as blog posts, user comments and tweets. Despite their obvious limitations, they can provide some insights on the sentiments held by some publics.

- Gathering data from various authorities that assess the condition of the population, including data from local authorities and the welfare, education and health authorities. For instance, the GIS – Geographic Information Systems – can suggest various databases, which can even be accessed by task forces in the field by means of mobile devices.
- Tracing online key words searches, using tools such as Google trends, enables changes to be detected in public interest, identify its rising concerns and address its information seeking habits. These can be analyzed according to time, location, and to some extent also according to social segments.
- Cameras: video footage with relevant information can arrive from closed circuit camera systems, spread out around cities and in various venues, from teams documenting their rescue operations, and sometimes also from occasional eye witnesses equipped with cameras and cellular phones, who now increasingly tend to send their photographed or videotaped reports to media outlets for publication.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.2 News media

- When the organisation is in charge of crisis management, while not acting impulsively and risking human lives, the crisis communication managers should try to be the first to inform the public at large about the crisis, before other organisations or the media are in the know."<sup>47</sup> Stealing others' thunder can help establish the organisation as a competent, relevant and credible crisis information source. Crisis communication managers are to be full partners in the decision-making processes. Their deep involvement is essential for finding opportunities to assist in the rescue efforts by means of appropriate messages, forming a general and unmediated idea of what is happening, and acting as advocates for the public and its preferences when decisions are being made. Taking part in the decision making may also help communication managers learn about the internal dynamics of their own organisation and its policies and preferences; this is a type of knowledge that cannot be acquired in other forums. Furthermore, their very presence around the decision making table symbolizes that communications specialists are a part of the organisation's main efforts, not marginal figures to be filled in after the fact so they can sing the praises of others.
- This phase is likely to be accompanied by extensive coverage, where most if not all of the media's attention will be devoted to the crisis, employing marathon broadcasts and expanded teams of reporters. If properly prepared, crisis communication management teams will also function in an expanded format. During the crisis, a communication team may face several challenges: to constantly receive and deliver updates, which requires a broadened attention span and self-control, as well as the ability to prioritize, coordinate and ensure

consistency across the messages being sent out, that is, required for effective communication. It may also be useful to distribute a factsheet, containing a small number of easily absorbable ideas, among everyone who is involved in public information (crisis communication managers, experts, key interviewees, the organisation's senior management, emergency call centre directors, webmasters and so forth). This step should be repeated every so often.

- The setting of a personal example by decision makers and leaders has a significant impact on the effectiveness of messages and instructions, and on the level of importance the public attributes to them. It is important to ensure that decision makers are aware of expectations that they set a personal example regarding appropriate conduct, such as using a bomb shelter, taking self-defence measures, and complying with the emergency instructions.
- Key points in phrasing messages:
  - Emphasis should be placed on the principle of helping individuals help themselves and their relatives. Instructions should focus on simple and practical self-defence actions, which amplify the recipients' sense of control and their motivation and willingness to stay up to date. <sup>48</sup>
  - The effectiveness of self-protection instructions can be illustrated with specific and fresh anecdotes about citizens who have survived the crisis by following them.
  - The ultimate test for the information that is been supplied to the public is the extent to which it enables individuals to make their own decisions regarding the crisis, based on mindfulness of the situation and of the ramifications of their decisions. <sup>49</sup>
  - It should be ensured that messages include issues that are of interest or concern to the public, based on the overall analysis of all the sources that are available regarding the public's attitudes.
  - It should be ascertained that the messages sent have indeed reached the population as a whole, including the previously mentioned special populations, such as foreign language speakers, persons with disabilities etc. In this phase, too, all the recipients of messages should be asked to pass them on to those in their environments who may not be exposed to them or have trouble understanding them properly.
  - Messages should not be limited to cognitive channels – emotional ones should also be used. However, to ensure effective communication, information-oriented messages should be separated from empathy-oriented ones. <sup>50</sup>
  - Fears should be acknowledged. When the population is fearful, it is no use pretending that they are not or telling them not to be. <sup>51</sup> It is important to

validate their perception that the situation is a hard and frightening one while also emphasizing the relatively reassuring facts, such as the low numbers of casualties and the effectiveness of the rescue operations. The public's legitimate concerns should be respected and accepted.<sup>52</sup>

- Over-pacifying people should be avoided, particularly when there is cause for concern. In the right proportions, concern actually puts people on guard and motivates them to take self-protection measures.<sup>53</sup> Over-pacifying people may boomerang, particularly if the situation deteriorates, causing damage to the organisation's credibility.
- The focus should be on messages that are unifying, and take a prospective stance, emphasizing the future and the measures that must be taken, as opposed to a retrospective stance, which focuses on the past accompanied by blaming and pinpointing those at fault. If it seems possible to briefly address such attributions of fault, without sliding into a scandal that may subsequently jeopardize the ability to take the required steps, this may be attempted; if not, it is best to postpone inquiry till the end of the crisis.
- To discourage dramatization, cautious language should be used. Explaining how to protect against a situation is preferable to providing a shockingly detailed description of its consequences. "The ways the public can protect itself" is better than "the ways the terror attack can hurt you", "virus spreading" is better than "plague".
- If possible – and without violating the general principle of no exclusivity in crises – messages should be directed to the most suitable media channels, based on considerations of urgency, timeliness, exposure, the presentational needs of the information and the target audiences.
- The media should be provided with convenient working space without interrupting the emergency forces. In this way the press corps can be assembled on a single site that will enable easy transfer of information. In case of high profile coverage, it might be worth considering opening a "communication centre" that will serve local and foreign media, which are likely to arrive in the event of a large-scale crisis.
- Even in times of crisis, when many journalists get involved, including those representing national and international media, room should nevertheless be made for the local media – particularly local radio and television, and especially if they can reach substantial audiences. From the crisis communication manager's perspective, the local channels have multiple advantages, first and foremost of which is the ability to communicate in a focused way with a distinct population that is directly affected by the crisis. In addition, the local media enjoy geographic and psychological proximity, possess superior knowledge regarding the region and its residents, escort the community long before the

national media arrives on the scene, and remain long after the national media exhausts its interest in the crisis.

- A prolonged crisis state presents a challenge for those in charge of communication, as they enter an emergency routine that tests their long-term resilience: their ability to work long shifts around the clock, constantly receiving and delivering updates, without burning out or becoming emotionally numb. To deal with these pressures, there is a need for plenty of trained staff who can serve as reinforcements.
- A prolonged crisis is likely to cause excessive reiteration of the same messages. One solution is to refresh messages creatively – for instance, by using onscreen textual instructions on television, instead of studio interviews with experts.<sup>54</sup>

### **3.3 Direct means of communication**

- This is the time to utilize all the direct channels that have been chosen: dedicated radio and television studios, or at least breaking into regular broadcasts, emergency call centres, emails, SMS, telephone blast services, the organisation's website, social networks, handouts for personal delivery, announcement devices or public address (PA) systems etc.
- Where possible, direct channels should be used first and foremost in order to reach publics that are not adequately accessible via regular media channels. Using direct channels allows messages to be repeated, so that the public can absorb them better. Creating communicational redundancy in this way catches the public's attention and helps overcome the decreasing capacity to comprehend new information, as mentioned earlier.
- The various channels should be cross-referenced. For example, radio and television broadcasters should be asked to direct their audiences to the organisation's website for additional information or to the call centre for answers to specific questions. Combining information with cross references can improve reach to various target populations, enhance the familiarity and authority of the instructions and help to get them across, and provide answers to specific questions as they arise.

### **3.4 Response organisation and network**

- It is important to have full coordination between the communication team and the crisis management and operations staffs. This may not be as easy as it seems. Without this, however, information gaps between the true circumstances and conditions on the ground and the organisation's statements can be expected. These may be interpreted by the media and the public as evidence of a loss of organisational control.

- If needed, the staffs that supply information to the public should be reinforced, preferably using the teams pre-assigned for this role.
- If care has been taken, in an earlier phase, to clearly allocate responsibilities among the agencies jointly managing the crisis, issues such as denying responsibility or mutual blame may be avoided or minimized at this point. Clear **inter and intra** division of responsibilities and accountabilities guarantees a more efficient handling of the crisis, providing for greater trust between the organisations and, ultimately, from the public as well.<sup>55</sup> Insofar as the crisis is being co-managed by a number of organisations, the communication manager should be careful not to overstep the limits of his or her responsibility without first discussing this with the partner organisations.
- It is important that messages are delivered not only outside of the organisation, but also internally, to all ranks. Any member of the organisation may have to speak on its behalf, particularly in a crisis situation.
- The response phase is the leadership's opportunity to prove itself. It is worth considering whether to involve the organisation's heads in delivering announcements to the public, as people who personify the organisation and its accountability to society. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that sometimes the head of the organisation is far from being the ideal person for this task. In any event, the organisation's heads should be kept in the update loops to prevent contradictory messages or assertions that will present them as being out of touch or as officials who learn from the media about what is going on (in their offices)
- During significant or large-scale crises, there is a special value in involving high-ranking officials, such as mayors, state governors or even national leaders, to address the public and provide a personal example. For them, this is an opportunity, not just to display leadership and resourcefulness, but also to demonstrate caring for the public, commitment to solving the crisis, and personal and direct involvement as well as help strengthen its resilience and ability to cope with the crisis.

## PHASE 4 Reconstruction (Recovery)

The crisis has just ended. Some people may have lost their lives, while others may have suffered physical, mental or financial damage. This is the time for physical and mental recovery on the way back to routine. The first challenge is to assist the immediate recovery and help society get back on track, to participate in the recovery of the damaged region and reinforce the resilience of society as a whole. Some crises require long-term relief and recovery, which presents a challenge in itself. The second challenge is to improve preparedness for similar future events, while utilizing the freshness of participants' experiences and memories, as well as accessibility to information, people and evidence, for comprehensive data collection that will allow for honest, thorough and courageous organisational lesson learning. It is essential to avoid falling into exchanges of blame, which is unfortunately, what tends to happen after some crises. Information gathering must be done quickly, with the understanding that some of the follow-up – data analysis, conclusion drawing and preparing for similar crises in the future – may get postponed until the next phase.

### 4.1 Citizens

- The end of a crisis, or its relief, signals the rise of the public need for assorted new information. For example, the public may wish to understand the new, post crisis reality in relation to various aspects of life, want to know whether another eruption of the crisis is likely, at least in the short term, and how soon they will be able to resume normal life.
- The information required will vary, according to the nature of the crisis. There are strong possibilities that answers will be expected to questions regarding basic needs: do we still need the means for self protection? Until when? What is the availability or scarcity of different supplies and services such as food, housing, medical aid, transportation? What information is there concerning relatives, education etc?
- The period immediately after the crisis presents a short window of opportunity for improving the public's resilience and future readiness. These steps will only be effective if accompanied by learning from both the failures and the successes of the organisation's crisis communication and of reinforcing positive action by the public.<sup>56</sup>
- When analyzing their activities, crisis communication managers should focus on the following aspects:
  - **Message analysis.** Both quantitative and qualitative methods should be applied to comparing the messages that were disseminated with the subsequent media coverage. It is worth investigating the degree to which

these messages were able to penetrate the media, on what occasions messages retained their original form, and when they were modified or distorted by the media. The tone, salience and visual aspects of coverage should be examined. Contradictory messages, terminological problems and misinterpretations of professional information should also be identified. The findings can be used for deriving broader principles and insights regarding future information delivery – both through the media and through direct channels.

- **Public attitudes analysis.** By combining methods such as surveys, interviews and focus groups, it can be ascertained which of the types of information that were supplied to the public actually reached it, through which media channels, and how aware the public was of the direct media channels that the organisation had made available, how closely the instructions were followed, and which of the public's informational needs and expectations were not met. Attention should be paid in particular to populations who were neglected, messages that did not receive a wide distribution and instructions that were not well absorbed. All the questions put by the public to the organisation's information centre and Internet forums should be analyzed to identify major types of questions and the typical audiences who tend to ask them, recurring questions, unforeseen problems and questions that were left unanswered.
- **Analyzing the communication strategy.** Based on the above evidence, managers should inquire into their organisation's overall level of success in meeting its communications goals: Which goals were not achieved and why, and which vital information failed to reach the public? In particular, the relationship between the coverage and delivery of information on the one hand and decision-making on the other should be investigated: were the crisis communication managers actually fully involved in decision-making? What was the ratio between the information they delivered to the public and the information about the public delivered to the decision makers? By focusing on the conclusions that may be drawn from this, the organisation can set new goals for crisis situations, and better plan and prepare for future crises.
- All the findings and the conclusions drawn should be processed into lesson learning documents, accompanied by a binding organisational decision to adopt the necessary steps. The organisation's crisis communication plan should be reassessed accordingly<sup>57</sup> and detailed goals established for improving it using a clear timetable.
- The main conclusions – particularly those related to improving the public's readiness and mobilizing it for action in the future – should be made known to the public at large.<sup>58</sup> It is important to be honest in outlining the organisation's strengths and weaknesses to the public, focusing on the main issues, and

presenting each problem along with the solution that the organisation has found.

- At this point, the media are likely to ask tough questions about the organisation's functioning during the crisis. Serious and candid answers should be given and blame games avoided.

#### 4.2 News media

**Media relations.** Managers should examine how the events unfolded in time by inquiring into decision-making processes, messages, various media outlets, journalists' involvement, and the subsequent publications, looking for associations and meaningful patterns between these elements. Attention should be paid to informational bottlenecks, and to difficulties encountered by journalists in accessing news scenes and contacting interviewees. This can be done by locating continuities and discontinuities in the contacts with reporters and the degree of media cooperation at various points. It is important to try to understand why certain messages did not make it through or got modified or distorted – did the problem start with the organisation's decision-making process? What is the way the message was originally phrased? How it was delivered? Or was it to do with the media's production and adaptation processes? Practical conclusions can then be drawn for improving the accuracy and effectiveness of the organisation's messages in the future.

- **Journalists and media people.** Journalists who covered the crisis could contribute to an evaluation, as they have been closely observing crisis communication managers' working under pressure. However, seeking to involve them in post hoc investigations may strike some journalists as an attempt by the establishment to co-opt them. Managers could develop a reflective dialogue with the relevant journalists, emphasizing how the collaboration can further both public and journalistic interests. Another useful strategy is to invite journalists to identify weak points in the crisis manager's interaction and suggest possible solutions. Involving journalists can also help the organisation develop good relations with them.

#### 4.3 Response organisation and network

- When gathering the information for lesson learning, the following actors should be consulted:
  - **Crisis communication managers.** Interviews and brainstorming sessions can be held with everyone who was involved in the crisis communication management, including reinforcement personal and the spokespersons of other organisations that took part in managing the crisis. The functioning of the communication managers in the inter-organisational framework and their collective ability to achieve their goals should be examined.

- **Organisational forums.** Managers should be fully involved in the internal forums engaged in reviewing the organisation's functioning and its decision-making processes during the crisis. They should be prepared to reassess their emergency plans in general and aspects of their communication in particular and to discuss their procedures and organisational strategy.<sup>59</sup> Were attempts made to exploit every opportunity to assist the rescue efforts? Was the manager's positioning – physical and managerial – in the course of the rescue operation an optimal one? Was the manager appropriately involved in the various crisis phases?
- **Inter-organisational level.** The inter-organisational level does not stop being crucial in this phase. Here, it is important to obtain and analyze input from the other organisations that have shared the emergency, including the crisis managers who dealt with aspects of the crisis not related to communication.
- **External consultants.** External crisis management experts or senior staff members in the organisation who possess the relevant experience can help in conducting a balanced and honest assessment of the communication manager's activities. An external expert can also help in designing new procedures for handling crises in the future.<sup>60</sup>

## PHASE 5 Evaluation

In this phase, the damaged areas should be thoroughly rehabilitated. The main challenges in this phase are to conclude learning the lessons based on the data collected in the former phase, to implement the required changes in a determined and systematic manner, and prepare for future crises accordingly. This phase embodies the beneficial aspects of the crisis, as it is the opportunity for structural reforms, budget reallocations and rebuilding of the affected regions in a way that does not merely recreate their prior conditions, but actually improves their state. The main challenge during this phase is to implement decisively and systematically the changes and tasks that were defined and prepare for future crises.

### 5.1 Citizens

- This is the main phase in which the crisis can prove itself as an opportunity for positive change: the decision to conduct wide organisational, structural and financial reforms, including investment in large-scale projects that will lead to improved preparedness in the future. The relevant agents -- decision makers, the public and the media -- are likely to feel readier to make such decisions after the crisis, insofar as the latter has exposed erroneous perceptions and irrelevant

political considerations, thereby making space for substantial change.<sup>61</sup> The awareness of the effects of the crisis among both the public and the decision makers can make it easier to allocate the budgets that these reforms will require. Implementing these reforms should be carried out as immediately as possible, before the issue fades from the public agenda.

- At this point, the data analysis conducted during the previous phase can be included to gain a broader perspective on the recent crisis with reference to similar crises in the past. With the public as its main reference point, the conclusion-drawing process should be conducted on the basis of all the evidence that has been gathered. . Some of these conclusions may necessitate difficult decisions, such as broad organisational changes, letting go of certain shared wisdoms, or modifications of organisational tactics and strategies of crisis management and its communicational aspects.

At this stage, if not in the former one, the media and the public may have their own assessments and views regarding the performance of the organisation during the crisis and the levels of its success in handling it. These may determine the levels of public criticism that communication managers will have to face. Such criticism should be used constructively and effectively while leveraging the momentum in order to improve the preparedness of the public for the next crisis.

## **5.2 News media**

- Communication managers should follow internal forums in which journalists and media people discuss their roles during the crisis. Such forums may be initiated by the media themselves, by their associations (journalist associations, ethics committees or press councils), or by academic institutions. Managers should try to participate in these forums, at least in a listening role. In this way, they are likely to learn about hitherto unknown issues.
- It is important to explore the functioning of the media in the temporal framework: do the reporters' choices during the crisis make sense at this point? How is the media itself different now that the crisis is over, compared to what it was before it started? What does this say about the capacity of the media to cover crises in the future? What adjustments should be made to be able to deal with these changes?
- Severe and dramatic crisis situations are likely to lead to journalistic investigations and even documentary films examining the events from an after-the-fact perspective. Such initiatives are likely to have a long-term influence on the symbolic representations of the crisis, its central players and the lessons to be learned from it. Managers need to be prepared to collaborate with these efforts as much as possible and use them as opportunities to deliver messages concerning future readiness.

### 5.3 Response organisation and network

- Post crisis learning processes are complex and replete with obstacles. Organisations tend to avoid learning processes owing to factors such as mental fixation, tendency to rely on intuition and improvisations and disrespect for the process and its importance among decision makers. One of the greatest difficulties in lesson learning is the necessity of the heads of the organisation to admit that there are problems, before trying to find a way to solve them and implement their conclusions. Successful learning processes are based on several factors, such as developing new and updated procedures, changing work patterns and jurisdictions, developing organisational and inter-organisational consensuses that will serve as a firm base for future optimal decision making.
- Learning from others can help communication managers form a comprehensive, broad-based view of their organisation. This can be done by going back to the communication managers from the other organisations that were involved in the crisis to complete the post-crisis investigations and lesson learning. Managers should try to learn from each other, for example by sharing documentation summarizing their respective conclusions. The focus should be on both failures and successes.
- The post-crisis learning process is now about to be completed. This is the phase to redefine the plan for managing the next crisis, establish organisational and inter-organisational procedures and begin implementing them in the organisation and among the public. For the communication manager this is the return to the starting point: the preparedness phase, but with an improved crisis communication action plan.

## **Appendix A: Main challenges**

Since effective communication during a crisis is a matter of life and death, and due to the fact that crisis situations are highly complex, crisis communication managers in agencies responsible for public safety face serious challenges. Here are some of the salient ones:

### **1. Delivering information in the absence thereof**

During a crisis, communication managers find themselves trapped: on the one hand, the public need for information increases, as do also the media's demands to supply the information right now; on the other hand, in many cases neither communication managers nor their organisation have any access to the expected information, or they possess information that is partial, initial, unexamined and contradictory. In these situations, understanding exactly what is happening can be problematic for crisis communication managers and their organisations.

### **2. Realizing the civil right to information for the purpose of self defence**

Imparting information to the public leads to the realization of the individual's general, overarching right to information concerning hazards and risks – particularly in times of life-endangering crises, when the public authorities, at least temporarily, are incapable of guaranteeing his or her safety. <sup>62</sup>In these situations in particular, it is individuals' right to receive information and specific instructions, based on accurate knowledge that will allow them to make informed choices concerning their own safety and that of their loved ones. <sup>63</sup>

### **3. Meticulous planning, openness to change**

To prepare well, meticulous planning and preparation for concrete scenarios is required; however, not every incident can be foreseen in a precise manner or be expected to follow the scenario. Hence, it is important to plan and do drills, but when the "real thing" happens, it is no less important to be willing to make quick changes in plans if the situation so requires it.

### **4. Temporary decrease in the ability to absorb information**

It is precisely when the public's need for information and guidance soars, that the ability to absorb information among certain people is likely to drop temporarily as the crisis comes to be experienced as increasingly immediate and intimidating. This is likely to translate into a real challenge for communication managers, who are now required to refine their messages and find ways of delivering them to reach these distressed members of the public. <sup>64</sup>

## **5. Pre-crisis credibility as a key to trust in a crisis**

For an agency interested in being seen by the public as an effective information source, particularly in times of crisis, credibility is the most precious asset. The problem is that when the crisis is on, it is too late to begin building a credible image. In fact, it is easier to lose credibility during a crisis than build it.

## **6. Integrating leadership with crisis communication efforts**

As familiar, symbolic and authoritative figures, decision makers and especially local and national leaders have a special status during the crisis. During the pre crisis phase, they can help motivate the public to prepare. During the crisis phase, they can prove their leadership, set a personal example, inspire and offer a sense of safety and calm, and encourage the public's resilience. At the end of the crisis, they can lead processes of rehabilitation, lesson learning and implementation of reforms. However, recruiting the leadership, and national leaders in particular, may be a complex task, especially for organisations that are located far from decision-making centres. These will sometimes need a mixture of preparation, initiative, creativity and persistence in order to recruit such leaders during times of need. <sup>65</sup>

## **7. Emphasizing the activities of the authorities without sliding into public relations**

The public's trust in the authorities, knowing that they are acting effectively and taking the right course despite possible difficulties that were revealed during the crisis, is an essential component in the public's resilience and motivation to act as instructed. In order to establish that trust, the public needs to know that the authorities are indeed acting vigorously, devotedly and effectively to minimize the damage caused by the crisis and that there is someone to trust. <sup>66</sup>For that matter, it is important to provide the public with accurate, reliable, comprehensive and convincing information regarding the specific actions taken by the authorities. However, the borderline between this type of information and mere public relations is thin, and crossing it may actually damage public trust.

## **8. Mobilizing the public to prepare even when the threat seems remote**

For the public to be ready for a crisis, there need to be drills and instructions, which are carried out primarily during ordinary times. The problem is that during such periods, the public tends to perceive threats as abstract and remote, and its motivation to pay attention to instructions, participate in drills and prepare for threats is consequently low, as is also the authorities' motivation to invest time and resources in scrupulous preparation at this point.

## **9. Helping the public help itself**

Contrary to expectations that the crisis is the business of the authorities, and they will take care of everything, it is important to provide the public with the tools and the motivation to take personal responsibility for its own preparedness. Personal responsibility-taking enables society as a whole to increase its preparedness as well as empower its citizens by giving them a sense of “there is something to be done”. It is also the only way of preparing residents for situations in which they may find themselves in charge of their own fate and the fate of those around them, such as large-scale disasters, in which it takes a long time for the rescue forces to reach all the victims. At the same time, it is important that this process is not perceived as the renouncement of responsibility by the authorities; hence, the authorities should provide support and supply the public with instruments for independent coping with the crisis.<sup>67</sup>

## **10. Nurturing inter-organisational collaborations and information networks**

Contrary to the tendencies of organisations to act independently, crises require inter-organisational collaboration. Coordinated action is highly important in modern crises, which tend to be systemic and to involve a whole range of organisations. Inter-organisational forums are critical for the development of tight collaboration and coordination among different organisations and their communication managers, for building cross-organisational systems that function synchronically during crises, and to enable a coordinated policy that projects power to the public. Such collaboration makes for consistency in major messages, helps in securing a more effective division of labour and promotes efficiency. On the other hand, lack of cooperation and coordination opens the door to contradictions in information and instructions that might harm the public's trust and its willingness to act accordingly. The challenge, therefore, is to nurture close collaboration and coordination between these authorities, particularly where obtaining and distributing information are concerned – which may go as far as building shared information networks, coordinating procedures and shared drills.

## **11. Working with the media and minimizing distortions**

When covering crises and disasters, the media exhibit a number of problematic tendencies, including dramatization, personalization, excessive emphasis on “human angles” and marginal issues, preoccupation with blame and nurturing myths<sup>68</sup> that have no factual basis. These tendencies sometimes lead to exacerbation of the dramatic, and a sense of catastrophe and helplessness.<sup>69</sup> Despite all this, it is impossible not to rely on the media as the primary information delivery channel. The challenge – particularly with respect to life-saving messages – is to learn to communicate information to the public accurately and with the right emphasis. This

requires establishing a partnership with the media <sup>70</sup> and taking steps to restrain its troublesome tendencies.

## **12. Staying up to date at the moment of truth**

While crisis communication managers are perceived as those who deliver the information, they are, at the same time, heavy consumers of information in their need to form a comprehensive and substantial picture of the crisis situation. They are themselves continually in receipt of rapid updates, which becomes challenging in certain situations. For example, when the crisis is prolonged, when information is delayed and when there are several agents involved in the management of the crisis, each taking a different stand as to what the public needs or wishes to know.

## **13. Coping with limited resources**

To cope successfully with crises, the resources an organisation has at its disposal pre-crisis are typically insufficient; a significant increase in human and other resources is required. In the communication field specifically, a small communication team, which often consists of no more than one spokesperson per organisation, becomes inadequate. Reinforcement is needed to deal with the complexity and pressure of having to cope on multiple fronts: the public, impatient for more information; the press, working in an expanded format and demanding more information, faster, and occasionally blaming the organisation for the crisis or criticizing its handling of it; the need to closely examine the ways in which the information has been absorbed by the media and the public; and the need to participate in many time-consuming organisational meetings. In addition to these multiple pressures, there is a need to keep working around the clock, deal with informational overload, keep up to date and coordinate with other agents. All these can hardly be met seriously without substantial reinforcements.

## **14. Identifying and taking care of special populations**

Special populations need special attention. Contrary to the natural tendency to focus on “the public”, in a crisis, there is a need to address various population groups, which may differ in their needs, levels of experience, habitual channels of communication and attitudes towards the authorities. Special-needs population groups may include, among others, children, the elderly, minorities, immigrants<sup>71</sup>, foreign language speakers<sup>72</sup>, tourists, the blind, the hearing-impaired, people with other disability issues, sick and medicated people. These population groups may be at risk for greater harm and may not rely as heavily on the communication channels serving the majority population. Communicating with these populations may require distinct messages, languages, speakers, and even at times distinct communication channels and technologies.

## **15. Combining communication and rescue plans**

At odds with what may seem a natural division of labour, in which rescue forces focus on rescue while crisis communication managers focus on promoting the organisation's image and aggrandizing the rescue efforts, the challenge in crises is to integrate the communication activity into the organisation's primary effort to save lives. Crisis communication managers need to participate in wider forums within their organisation, including meetings with the organisation's rescue forces, and be involved in their processes of thinking, planning and decision-making. They need to make use of their skills to try and minimize or prevent risks by effectively instructing the public and finding other creative ways to contribute to rescue efforts.<sup>73</sup>

## **16. Preserving and passing on knowledge and experience**

With the passing of time and changes in personnel much of the knowledge and experience in dealing with crisis that the organisation may have paid a very high price for is likely to be lost. This is particularly likely to happen when the organisational culture tends to rely on oral tradition, rather than documentation, and retain the staff's skills in the form of tacit knowledge<sup>74</sup> that is not systematically brought into awareness and documented. On the other hand, organisations with a crisis culture not only document their procedures and experience in writing, but also update them constantly.

## **17. Dealing with criticism and blame**

At a certain point during a crisis and sometimes after, the organisation is likely to face criticism, blame and attributions of responsibility for the crisis or its management from the public, from other organisations and from the media, whose tendency for finger-pointing intensifies during these situations. There is also a likelihood of criticism from within the organisation, which may evoke a sense of inconsistency, lack of control and damage credibility. In facing all these, communication managers have to maintain public trust in the authorities, as this is a critical condition for sustaining resilience and motivating the public to act according to instructions. This also requires sincerity and accountability for personal or organisational decisions taken during the crisis.

## **18. Bridging the gap between expert knowledge and the general public**

During crises (as well as in situations of danger or catastrophe), communication managers are sometimes required to bridge complex gaps between the professional experts and commentators on the one hand, and the general public on the other, who might not understand, or understand incorrectly, the information and guidance provided by experts and commentators. The public may find it difficult to absorb the information and instructions that the experts are providing and distortions may follow.<sup>75</sup>

This becomes even more challenging when understanding the situation and the required actions involves scientific knowledge, as in the case of epidemics, natural disasters, or exposure to toxic substances. The communication problem in such instances is co-created by both parties: the experts, who bring knowledge, viewpoints and professional terms that are difficult to translate into popular language and the public, who bring varying education levels, misperceptions of risks and scientific issues and, occasionally, distrust of experts or the fields they represent.<sup>76</sup>

## **19. Learning from the crisis after it is over**

After the crisis is over, just as before it started, there remains the challenge of mobilizing the public and the relevant organisations to learn from it. Although the freshness of memories and the easy accessibility of the information make it a precious learning opportunity that could lead to better crisis preparedness in the future, most people are naturally eager to return to their routine activities and forget the crisis or whatever lessons may be learned from it, until another one looms.<sup>77</sup>

## Appendix B: Core dilemmas and common myths

Crises tend to evoke a number of dilemmas that stem from contradictions between various values, between the desired and the actual, and between needs and the necessities. To act in the right way, ethically and professionally, it is vital to get to know these dilemmas and reflect upon them, in order to make informed choices about what is best for the public and for the organisation in any given crisis situation.

### Core dilemmas

**Dilemma 1:** Satisfying the public's need for information regarding the actions that were taken by the authorities versus sliding into self aggrandizing information and propaganda.

**On the one hand**, in crisis situations information about the measures the authorities' are taking is essential to enable the public to make its own assessment of the extent to which the authorities are acting in a dedicated, effective and competent manner, and moving in the right direction. These impressions shape the public's willingness to rely on the authorities and act according to their instructions.

**On the other hand**, it is easy here to cross the borderline and slide into mere propaganda, protection and promotion of the organisation's image and its heads, which are inappropriate objectives particularly when lives are at stake.<sup>78</sup>

**Dilemma 2:** Preparing for generic or specific scenarios

**On the one hand**, a general scenario will cover various crises, allow flexible preparation, and exempt organisations and the public from having to deal with a variety of scenarios that might require responses of very different, at times even contradictory or confusing, types. General scenarios take less time to implement, can be adapted to various circumstances and can be altered as the situation requires.

**On the other hand**, a specific scenario is more effective in addressing a specific threat, particularly when that threat is severe and has a high probability of occurring. Preparing for a specific scenario involves pinpointing bottlenecks, needs, tasks and issues requiring coordination and care, to better allocate resources and define areas of responsibility and accountability. Focusing on a specific scenario increases coherence and consistency in working methods and decreases uncertainty. In addition, communication strategies for specific scenarios should be considered; for example, health risks require different treatment than e.g. power cuts caused by a storm, and involve different organisations in the response network.

**Dilemma 3:** Transparency and honesty versus withholding information

**On the one hand**, research shows that it is the absence of information – and not its presence – that is likely to aggravate the public's fears, undermine its

trust in the authorities and interfere with social resilience. Partial information is also likely to evoke a sense that the authorities have something to hide.

**On the other hand**, organisations and public agencies cannot act efficiently and be fully transparent at the same time. Extensive transparency during a war, for example, may expose sensitive information to the enemy. During shortages of protective resources, such as vaccines, it may interfere with public order and rescue efforts. The borderline between withholding information based on this serious consideration and doing so for the sake of convenience or for political reasons is likely to be thin and blurred at times.

**Dilemma 4:** Immediate response versus precision about details

**On the one hand**, it is important, in all phases, not to delay information, particularly when it is related to a threat to human lives or ways of coping with such a threat. In addition, delivering the information fast prevents rumours and narrows the space for unofficial and less reliable sources to distribute inaccurate information of their own.

**On the other hand**, at times, the required information is unavailable, or there may be a concern about its completeness, consistency or precision. Rashness may lead to loss of trust and at times even endanger human lives.

**Dilemma 5:** Local versus national media

**On the one hand**, there is a natural tendency to prefer the national media in crisis situations due to its superior quality, credible image, reputable journalistic teams that it has at its disposal, wider distribution scope and better media coverage opportunities.

**On the other hand**, there is a need to avoid overlooking or neglecting the local and regional media. First, since crises are usually local or regional occurrences. Second, since local and regional media are usually well equipped to cover the crisis in a focused way, due to their strong acquaintance with the region, the population and its needs, their willingness to devote more news space to the crisis, and their greater empathy and concern for the residents. Third, the local and regional media will follow the crisis all along, starting in the pre-crisis phase of preparing the population and continuing into the post-crisis phase of lesson-learning, whereas the national media may find interest only in the emergency phase.

**Dilemma 6:** The media versus direct communication channels

**On the one hand**, direct channels, such as the organisational website, information centres, and sometimes dedicated television and radio studios, can allow full control over the messages that go out to the public, while bypassing the media and thereby avoiding its distortions and disruptions. In very extreme cases, when a total collapse of the communication systems occurs, direct means of communication such as the distribution of printed brochures or the use of local public address (PA) systems might become, in fact, the only reliable channels of communication with the public.

**On the other hand**, at times of crisis the majority of the population is likely to prefer traditional communication outlets, primarily radio and television. Furthermore, overreliance on direct communication channels may give the organisation the misleading impression that the information has been distributed effectively. Adding these channels also increases the likelihood of contradictions, lack of coordination and non-updated flow of information.

## **Myths and misperceptions**

Crises are sometimes accompanied by pseudo-dilemmas, which stem in part from unfounded myths about the crisis and the way it is perceived by the public. It is important for crisis communication managers to become acquainted with these myths, in order to be ready to refute them. References to research can be of help here. The following is a list of common myths.

### **Myth 1:** Revealing information will cause the public to panic

This is a widespread yet unfounded myth that typically serves as an excuse for withholding information. Multiple research studies conducted since the 1940s demonstrate consistently and with certainty that this is a superstition, fed by the media and popular film.<sup>79</sup> What is more likely to provoke panic in crisis is in fact the absence of information, not its presence.<sup>80</sup> Of course, matters should be well explained, and anyhow, information alone cannot prevent worries. A certain level of worry is actually productive, helping mobilize the public for readiness and motivate it to follow instructions. The overwhelming majority of the population not only remains panic-free during crises, but acts rationally, stays focused and displays altruism.<sup>81</sup> Most people not only manage to act appropriately, but actively assist in rescuing others and in re-establishing order.<sup>82</sup> Many survivors are rescued and cared for by their neighbours and relatives long before the rescue forces reach them.<sup>83</sup> However, this insight should not be seen as licence for non-selective distribution of information that may confuse, overload and distract the public from the organisation's main messages.

### **Myth 2:** Crisis communication management is best done intuitively

Definitely not so! With all due respect for the role of intuitions in routine communication management, in a crisis, relying on intuition can cost lives and so should be avoided.<sup>84</sup>

When human lives are in danger, each agent must act in a systematic manner, based on the best evidence available. Intuition is particularly unreliable when the situation at hand has not been experienced on a number of occasions in the past.<sup>85</sup> At times of crisis or disaster, different publics have different informational needs and patterns of information seeking,<sup>86</sup> which cannot be speculated in the absence of solid evidence, and learning about them is crucial for effective communication. Even experienced communication experts may have difficulties foreseeing how their crisis messages will be perceived and interpreted by different segments of the public.<sup>87</sup> This is the reason why it is

important to monitor reactions and use feedback in an ongoing communication process.

**Myth 3:** There is no point in preparedness, since every crisis is unique  
This approach tries to provide rationalizations for avoiding preparedness, under the pseudo philosophical excuse that every crisis is unique anyway, as is its resonance among the public. Some even claim that excessive attachment to plans may lead to rigidity in thinking and interfere with reality testing, and that it may be better to “keep an open mind”, improvising according to the exigencies of the moment. Such approaches are not to be tolerated. Lack of planning and preparedness puts human lives at the mercy of fate, setting the phase for inconsistency and neglect of the necessary actions. The better an organisation has prepared for a crisis, by adjusting its plans to its specific risk factors and conditions, the better that organisation’s ability to function during the crisis and to respond efficiently and appropriately. <sup>88</sup>

**Myth 4:** "We will tell the media what to say"

The media does not work for the crisis communication manager. In most cases they wouldn’t recruit themselves to distribute managers’ messages fully and verbatim -- even if they were written proficiently, replete with good intentions and focused on saving lives. Even if the press selects the organisation’s messages for publication, the scope, the tone, the emphasis and the frequency of some of the published material at least will probably not conform the organisation’s intentions, targets and standards. The media might also give voice and exaggerated exposure to dubious information which comes from rumours, anecdotes, “eye witnesses” and pseudo experts who seek to exploit the crisis to promote their services or agendas.

## Appendix C: List of additional recommended guides

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- 1 Scheuren et al., (2008)
  - 2 Lowrey, (2004)
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  - 4 Van de Walle & Turoff, (2007)
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- 7 Grunig et al., (2002)  
8 Lindell & Perry, (2004)  
9 Lowrey, (2004)  
10 Reynolds, (2002)  
11 Coombs, (2006)  
12 Disaster: an event that: Involves more groups who normally do not need to interact in order to manage emergencies; Requires involved parties to relinquish the usual autonomy and freedom to special response measures and organisations; Changes the usual performance measures; Requires closer operations between public and private organisations (The University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center, cited by Boano, 2010).  
13 Emergency: an event that may be managed locally without the need of added response measures or changes to procedure (The University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center, cited by Boano, 2010).  
14 Catastrophe: an event that: Destroys most of a community; Prevents local officials from performing their duties; Causes most community functions to cease; Prevents adjacent communities from providing aid (The University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center, cited by Boano, 2010).  
15 Boano, (2010)  
16 Coombs, (2006)  
17 Ulmer et al., (2007)  
18 Taylor & Perry, (2005)  
19 Perry et al., (1982)  
20 Fischhoff, (2002)  
21 Blanchard-Boehm et al.,( 1998)  
22 Reynolds, (2002)  
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26 Coombs, (2007)  
27 Heath & Palenchar, (2000)  
28 Mileti & Beck, (1975), Ben Avraham, (2009)  
29 Mileti, & Fitzpatrick, (1992)  
30 Aguirre et al. (1991)  
31 Reynolds & Seeger, (2005)  
32 Seeger et al., (2009)  
33 Urquhart & Heilmann, ( 1984)  
34 Sorensen & Mileti, (1991)  
35 Fischhoff, (2005)  
36 Segal & Sharabi, (2009), Ben Avraham, (2009)  
37 Taylor & Perry, (2005)  
38 Taylor et al., (2005)  
39 Murdock et al., (2003)  
40 Hindman & Coyle, (1999); Seeger,(2009)  
41 Scanlon, (2006)  
42 Peters et al., (1997)  
43 Egbert & Parrott, (2001)  
44 Fischhoff, (2005)  
45 Ulmer et al., (2007)  
46 Allan, (2006)  
47 Arpan, & Pompper, (2003)  
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50 Harro-Loit et al, (2010)  
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58 Mileti & Fitzpatrick, (1992)  
59 Health Canada Crisis communication Unit, (2003)  
60 OECD Guidance Document on Risk Communication for Chemical Risk Management  
(2002)  
61 Seeger et al., (2005)  
62 Ben Avraham, (2009)  
63 Reynolds & Seeger, (2005)  
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