

## Crisis Management: A Primer

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**Abstract:** A crisis is an unexpected and sudden event that disturbs an organization. The process of handling such a disruption is called crisis management. Crisis management is about identifying possible threats and drastic changes to the way organizations and their stakeholders do business, and the methods put in place to deal with these threats. No organization is immune to a potential crisis. Crisis management is essential to surviving the challenges of the 21st century. This paper provides a primer on crisis management.

**Keywords:** crisis, types of crisis, crisis management, crisis management plan.

### INTRODUCTION

We live in a turbulent environment in which we experience crisis after crisis. Today's organizations are operating in an environment characterized by high uncertainty, risk, and turbulence, for example, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, corporate scandals, major product defect, war, to name a few. Figure 1 shows a typical destruction after a tornado struck Arabi, LA [1]. These unanticipated crisis events have far-reaching and significant impact on organizations, individuals, and society.

A crisis is any emergency that disturbs employees and causes organizational instability. It is a sudden series of incidents that affect an individual, group, organization, and society. Crises abound in the modern world today. They can happen to any organization at any time. They are not limited to corporate America. A crisis can create three related threats: public safety, financial loss, and reputation loss. A crisis might be encountered in the daily operations of any business. Several factors, such as technological disruptions, financial problems, employee-related disputes, or natural disaster, might cause a crisis. Despite a lack of a universal agreement on what crisis means, its several characteristics appear to be most frequently noted by researchers in an effort to understand the nature of crises, including: (a) being highly ambiguous, unknown, and unexpected, (b) having a low probability of occurrence yet high impact on organizations, (c) offering little time to respond, and (d) presenting a challenge for decision making that leads to better or worse results [2,3].

Crisis management is a general process that can take on many forms to address sudden and significant events. It may be regarded as the best practices for facing the worst. Crisis management involves making a plan, one that anticipates the unpredictability of world events and the dependability of your organization.

**WHAT IS CRISIS MANAGEMENT?**

A crisis is essentially any mishap, tragedy or ill event that carries negative effects. Crises may involve threats, such as policy uncertainty, climate change, cyberattacks, geopolitical instability and overregulation, push organizations to prepare for all types of “troubling” scenarios. Sometimes the scale of a crisis is global as with the coronavirus pandemic or it could be local as a natural disaster. When a crisis occurs, it may significantly [4]:

- Threaten the safety or well-being of a company’s people.
- Impair a company’s ability to operate effectively.
- Harm a company’s public reputation or image.
- Impact a company’s bottom line.
- Increase a company’s insurance exposures.

Crisis management, also known as reputation management, is the act of handling a crisis effectively. It refers to the response of an organization to a crisis. Three elements are common to a crisis: (a) a threat to the organization, (b) the element of surprise, and (c) a short decision time [5]. The response often includes action in the following areas: Crisis prevention, crisis assessment, crisis handling, and crisis termination.

The five steps for crisis management are illustrated in Figure 1 and explained as follows [6]:

Step 1 – Mobilize the crisis action center (CAC): Focus on the employees, customers and suppliers. What is each person’s role?

Step 2 – Analyze: We take the time to clearly see ourselves, our challenges, and our objectives.

Step 3 – Decide: This step involves placing resources against priorities and charge individuals and departments with specific tasks.

Step 4 – Execute: Once execution begins, you must continuously assess. Do not expect the plan to go perfectly. You must have the ability and agility to quickly adapt and call an audible when necessary.

Step 5 – After action reviews or “Hot Wash:” When in crisis mode, take the time each day to review, learn, adapt, and grow. Once you get the CAC organized, do not forget to rehearse. Periodically, leaders must rehearse a crisis.

Having a crisis management team in place is highly recommended as they can proactively prepare the business for a crisis.

**TYPES OF CRISIS**

The following are some of the most common types of crisis an organization can face [7,8]:

(a) *Natural Disasters*: These are “acts of God” that occur naturally, including earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, storms, droughts, etc.

(b) *Confrontational Crisis*: This kind of crisis occurs when two groups clash due to opposing interests. For example, protests, boycotts, sit-ins, blockades, and threats occur in such situations. This may also lead to divorce in marriage or war between nations,

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- (c) *Technological Crisis*: Human application of science and technology causes a crisis of this kind. When technology crashes or causes an issue, or humans mismanage technology, it can spiral into a crisis. An example is a bridge that collapses.
- (d) *Organizational Crisis*: Sometimes an organization’s management may take decisions that are not proper and informed. An organizational crisis occurs when a company has significantly wronged its consumers.
- (e) *Rumors*: False information or rumors about an organization can damage its reputation and goodwill. For example, a company’s rival may spread misinformation about its products.
- (f) *Workplace Violence*: Violence among workers can also be a common kind of crisis.
- (g) *Business Crisis*: This happens when the stability of a business is put at risk unexpectedly. It could be external or self-inflicted. It could impact your company, employees, and customers.
- (h) *Social Media Crisis*: Sometimes social media can be the cause of a PR crisis. Having an employee accidentally tweet from the company account instead of their own can have disastrous effects on a brand’s reputation. Claims of racial bias spread like wildfire in the social media.
- (i) *Personnel Crisis*: A personnel crisis occurs when an employee or individual associated with an organization is involved in unethical or illegal misconduct.
- (j) *Financial Crisis*: A financial crisis loses value in its assets and the company cannot afford to pay off its debt. This is usually due to a drop in revenue for products or services.
- (k) *Reputation Crisis*: Good brand reputation is essential, but fragile. Reputation crisis might cause a business to lose or tarnish their reputation. The credibility and reputation of organizations is heavily influenced by the perception of their responses during crisis situations.
- (l) *Public-sector Crisis*: No sector of society is immune to crisis. Public-sector crisis may involve a school shooting, a public health crisis or a terrorist attack that leaves the public seeking comfort in the calm.
- (m) *Educational Crisis*: This happens when faculty, students or staff of a college go on strike due to some unfavorable conditions.

Some of these types of crisis are displayed in Figure 3 [9].

### CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

Crisis events are difficult to manage without some sort of structure and plan. Until the unforeseen crisis occurs, all you and your organization can do is plan ahead. A crisis management plan outlines how your business will respond if a crisis occurs. Planning responses for each crisis will prepare your team and reduce the long-term damage done to your organization. To organize your plan, use a crisis management template with the following six steps [10]:

1. *Identify your crisis leadership team*: Select a team of leaders to collaborate with during the crisis planning process. Put this team together at the very beginning of crisis management planning so everyone knows the ins and outs of your crisis strategy. When a crisis hits your organization, it is important to assign a small team to manage the situation. Employees who are strategic thinkers are especially useful in this team.
2. *Assess risk*: Have a brainstorming session to assess various risks your organization may face.

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3. *Determine the business impact:* Determine the business impact of these risks with the help of your crisis leadership team. Potential business impacts may include customer attrition, damaged reputation, delayed sales, lost income, or regulatory fines.
4. *Plan the response:* Take each risk you have identified and determine what actions your team would need to take to respond to the threat if it does happen.
5. *Solidify the plan:* A crisis management plan is more than a written or verbal strategy. You will need to collaborate with key stakeholders so that everyone understands what to do and when.
6. *Review and update:* Once your crisis plan is complete, review the final product to ensure there are no gaps. Revisit your crisis management plan and update it at least once a year.

These steps are summarized in Figure 4 [10]. Besides these steps, one can also consider crisis management as consisting of three stages as shown in Figure 5 [11]: the pre-crisis phase (prevention and preparation), the crisis phase (response), and the post-crisis phase (learning and revision).

### APPLICATIONS OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

A crisis is an event which has the potential to fundamentally change an organization. Crisis management is the task of minimizing the deleterious effects of a serious crisis event using limited resources under extreme time constraints. The issue of crisis management is found in many fields. It is applied in various areas such as organization, business, marketing, finance, social media, hotel, healthcare, etc. We will consider some of them here.

➤ *Organizational Crisis Management:* A crisis is a sudden event or set of circumstances that could significantly affect an organization’s ability to carry out its business, that damages an organization’s reputation and/or threatens the environment, the health, safety, and well-being of employees, customers, or the public at large. Organizational crises can have significant impacts on businesses, potentially threatening their survival and long-term viability. Financial crises, environmental disasters, technology setbacks, and reputational problems are just a few of the various ways that an organization may experience a crisis [12]. Organizational crises have been examined from multiple perspectives, such as psychological, social-political, and technological-structural. From the psychological point of view, crises are highly uncertain, complex, and emotional events during which people are limited in their information processing capabilities. From the social-political perspective, a crisis occurs as a result of a breakdown in collective sense making or as a failure of followers’ belief in leadership and cultural norms. From the technological-structural perspective, the cause of a crisis is closely related to technologies that interact with managerial, structural, and other factors of an organization internally and externally. An organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact situation that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution [1].

➤ *Hotel Crisis Management:* Hotels would be more likely than a take-out restaurant manager to have difficulties in evacuating visitors during a weather-related emergency. The physical location of a hotel is another issue to consider when preparing for a disaster. A hotel manager in the Midwestern United States, for example, may not have to worry about hurricanes, but they must be prepared for snow and ice storms. The manager should create and implement an emergency plan to successfully prepare for a catastrophe [13].

➤ *Healthcare Crisis Management:* Crisis management in a healthcare setting refers to the process of identifying, assessing, and responding to a crisis situation. For example, crisis situations in a mental health setting may include suicide attempts, severe depression, psychosis, trauma, and other forms of emotional distress. The causes of a crisis may include several factors such as a history of mental health problems,

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traumatic events, changes in life circumstances, and exposure to stressors. In a psychiatric setting, crisis management often involves providing a range of services, such as crisis hotlines, emergency departments, inpatient units, and outpatient services. The consequences of mental health are shown in Figure 6 [14]. During a healthcare crisis, leadership should be empathetic, responsive, honest, and in tune with the diverse needs of the people. Healthcare leaders should focus on planning, communication, and quick action. Weak leadership in these situations can be damaging.

➤ *Global Crisis Management:* While international business expansion presents many opportunities, there are also a multitude of challenges that companies face when deciding to operate on a global scale. Today’s international business environment is largely uncontrollable, highly uncertain and complex, and constantly evolving, which exposes companies to multiple areas of risk. Examples of crises involving multinationals can be found in the media around the world on a regular basis. Managing a crisis in multiple countries introduces new complexities that create enormous challenges for multinationals. What worked for crisis management in the home country may not work well in other countries where the multinational has operations [15].

➤ *Financial Crisis Management:* In most countries, more-effective resolution tools are required to preserve financial stability in an increasingly complex and interconnected global system. Conditions in some countries require government interventions, including targeted programs to alleviate debt overhangs in the household and commercial real estate sectors. Enhanced supervision of cross-border exposures and related systemic risks is also needed. Moral hazard has increased, in part as sectors have become more concentrated, while financial systems are still prone to stress and turmoil. The financial upheavals of 2007–09 exposed serious weaknesses in crisis management and resolution. In many ways, the crisis is ongoing and further analysis is needed [16].

➤ *Social Media Crisis Management:* Social media has emerged as an effective arm in tackling crises for businesses these days. Several brands use Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook for crisis management marketing. With social media we actually have the opportunity to hear what people are saying about us and our businesses. No matter how careful and cautious you are with your content, a social media crisis always has the potential to strike. The best social media crisis management starts long before any issue arises. Learn how to create a plan to mitigate risk and respond quickly [17].

## BENEFITS

Crisis management is about reducing damage to achieve better outcomes for the organization. This saves time, money, and effort, while nurturing continuous improvement. Crisis management is a crucial aspect every company needs to consider when going into business. From employees to executives to vendors in your supply chain, it is vital that everyone understands their role and responsibilities during a crisis. When properly done, effective crisis management leads to a quicker mean time to recovery and delivers more thorough protection of your people, places, and property. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the overall field of crisis management will benefit as theory becomes more relevant and applicable for practitioners. All of this means a better bottom line.

Crisis management has the following additional benefits [18]:

- Prevention is better than cure, and thus it saves an organization from the time and costs it might lose in the chance of a crisis.
- Reduces the negative impact of the crisis, which could have been more if not planned.
- Saves the reputation of the business.

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- Devise strategies to come out of uncertain conditions and decide on future courses of action.
- Recognize the early signs of a crisis, warn employees of potential consequences and take precautions to mitigate the resulting damages.
- Identify the activities and processes that managers and employees can utilize to analyze and understand events which might lead to crisis and uncertainty.
- Respond effectively to changes in the organization culture.
- Coordinate between various departments to overcome emergency situations.
- Protect your reputation by practicing proactive transparency in all media relations.

**CHALLENGES**

No organization is immune from a crisis that can strike unexpectedly, and that can have profound negative effects on its operations, can imperil future growth, profitability, and even the company’s bottom line [19]. The five most common challenges of crisis management are discussed as follows [20]:

1. *Too Much Information:* When an emergency strikes, the floodgates of communication swing open. It is common for the crisis manager is to become overwhelmed with the amount of information flying at them from all angles.

2. *Too Little Information:* When a crisis occurs, people want to know what happened. Crisis experts often talk of an information vacuum being created by a crisis. If you do not have too much information, you have too little. Even in day-to-day business communications, reliance on just one channel can lead to trouble. We live in a connected world, and there is no longer any excuse for relying exclusively on email to get information out.

3. *No Contact Data:* What use is instant, multi-channel messaging if you do not have anyone to send it to? Contact information is one of the easiest things to plan before a crisis because all of the important stakeholders are known well in advance of an emergency situation. When crises come down to seconds, a quick response can make all the difference.

4. *Unpredictable Situations:* By nature, a crisis is very difficult to plan for. When the crisis comes, it is difficult to write considered communications in an atmosphere of high pressure and confusion. If a crisis has occurred, proper documentation will help you learn from the previous recovery process to plan for the next one.

5. *No Visibility:* Fast action depends on the right people opening the message in time, and on you being aware that they have opened it. When crisis strikes, time becomes your most precious resource. And by utilizing the myriad of communication tools at your disposal, you can ensure it is on your side when the unexpected occurs.

**CONCLUSION**

Crisis management refers to the process of preparing for, responding to, and recovering from a disruptive event that has the potential to cause harm to an organization. It is the implementation of certain steps to reduce an event’s negative effects. It is the series of actions taken by a company during a crisis. A good crisis management program will need a strategy to deal with stakeholders in varying ways, depending on the circumstances. Ensuring your business is prepared for any number of possible crises will allow you to maintain a positive and professional reputation with your customers and competitors as well as your employees.

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Crisis management is a relatively new concept or field that has only received research attention in recent years. Therefore, there is much to learn about it. In spite of this, crisis management is becoming popular and widely used term. It is even said that its popularity makes it difficult and problematic to define it. More information about crisis management can be found in the books in [21-38] and the following related journals:

- *The Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*
- *Journal of Management*
- *Journal of International Management*

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Figure 1 A typical destruction after a tornado struck [1].



Figure 2 The five steps for crisis management [6].

### Types of Crisis



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Figure 3 Types of crisis [9].



Figure 4 Six steps for creating crisis plan [10].



Figure 5 Three stages of crisis management [11].



Figure 6 The consequences of mental health [14].