

Unit Introduction



Now that you have completed the majority of Functional Area One, you will begin to put all that theory into practice throughout the rest of the course.

The Crisis Communication unit is going to combine what you have learned in Media Relations and Communication Planning to create effective emergency planning.

Almost all of your units/commands have a Crisis Communication plan in place. For the most part, you will be taking an existing plan and modifying and updating it with the needed information.

Unit Introduction

"Perception is reality." This is the mantra of every public affairs practitioner. This keeps us up at night and drives us during our day-to-day operations. There isn't a thing that happens in our profession where public perception isn't at the forefront of our consciousness. We must understand that public perception is shaped by individuals and the collective experience of those receiving the message. When dealing with public issues, public perception will vary depending on the situation, social environment and organization dealing with the situation.



Unit Introduction



When civilian public relations practitioners talk about crisis communication, they are referring to accidents or incidents, such as product tampering or airliner crashes. Events like these pose a serious threat to a company's stock price, market share or its very survival. Public perception about the organization and the event affecting it is influenced by an individual or collective experience.

For the military services, however, not every serious event threatens the survival of the armed services. Events like an airplane crash or equipment defects, although unfortunate, occur with such frequency that

the armed services consider them to be incidents or emergencies, but not crises. However, there are other things that confront the military that are considered a crisis where in the private sector the public views it as a minor issue.

Unit Introduction

In the military, crisis communication refers to any situation that has the potential to threaten the relationship between the military and the media, or public. As a public affairs officer, one of your main priorities is to maintain a positive relationship with the public and the media.

The media will report the issues. Make sure you develop a positive relationship with the media to ensure the right messages are getting out. The public will interpret the issues based on their perception.

PAOs need to anticipate crises by developing an awareness of which issues and situations are potentially damaging. They should develop a plan on how to handle these situations so they do not undermine your organization's relationship with the community.

In this unit you will learn what constitutes a crisis, and identify the signs of a situation becoming a crisis. You will also learn the PAO's responsibilities during a crisis.



Objectives

- Define crisis communications terminology.
- Explain the public affairs role in crisis operations.

Unit Overview

In order to meet the objective, we will cover these areas:

- Issues, emergencies and crises: Differences among these concepts
- The five types of crises
- How to recognize a crisis
- How to prevent a crisis from developing
- The Public Affairs objectives in crisis communications
- The PAO's responsibility in communicating with various publics during a crisis.
- Public Affairs and the National Response Plan

Issues, Emergencies, and Crisis



Every organization is confronted with three types of events: issues, emergencies and crises. Issues, being the lesser in severity of the three, are handled more frequently than emergencies and crises.

PAOs must be able to identify the characteristics of each one and be able to offer the proper counsel.

Let's take a closer look at the characteristics that define all three.

Defining An Issue



An issue is defined as any matter in dispute. When there are two or more conflicting points of view on a subject, that subject becomes an issue. Issues do not have a specific start or end point, so you and your staff can usually prepare for them.

What usually comes up as issues for the military are events that affect ordinary society. The public has become concerned about the ethical behavior of public and private sector leadership and the decisions they make about issues.

Situations like environmental problems and pollution control, workplace safety, health, and equal opportunity for

minorities and women have become more important in our society; thus they have affected government agencies, too.

Your command will likely have a standard position on such issues. Some issues may be answered routinely by the PAO. Therefore, PAOs should make sure they've got the latest information and position.

Key features of an issue

Issues will call into question an organization's principles and practices over time. Issues management allows for early identification of issues with potential impact on an organization, and it allows for a strategic response designed to mitigate or capitalize on their consequences. Public responses are required in a timely fashion but not as critical as responding to an emergency or crisis.



Managing an issue means deploying resources strategically to affect the impact of the issue.

Coordinating an issue is the process of gathering information, assessing its impact, and communicating to the appropriate people.

Positioning an issue means identifying the position you want to occupy in the minds of the target audience. Once you decide on the positioning of an issue, then the messages will flow from that positioning.

Defining An Issue

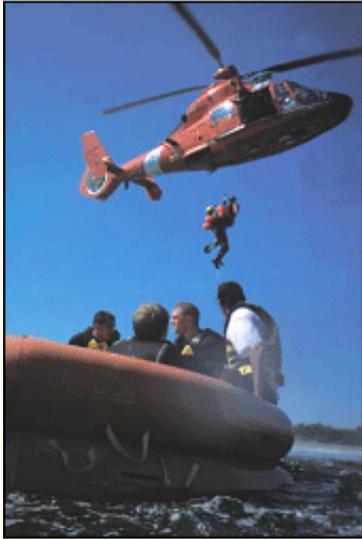
Other issues may start with a telephone call today that requires a command or service to create a policy. It's important to have public affairs input on policies that involve the nature of news. What may appear to be a simple matter of policy may turn into something more if not monitored.

Looking at an issue from the public's perspective may reflect a larger problem. Public affairs practitioners' input must include this possibility as they counsel leadership. PAOs should let leadership know the implications of public opinion.

Remember, a good policy poorly communicated can have the same effect as a bad policy. The government relies on public support. Strong public opposition can change decisions.

Can you think of a issue or policy that created controversy with the public?

Defining an Emergency



An emergency is a sudden, usually unexpected occurrence requiring immediate action and prompt communication. However, if an issue is not handled properly it can escalate into an emergency.

Emergencies typically involve accidents or incidents, such as crashes, crimes, fires and riots. Natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, or a military response to an international situation may also be considered emergencies. Unlike issues, emergencies usually have a well-defined starting point.

An emergency can range from a small-scale local incident to a large-scale national or international incident. Depending on the magnitude of the emergency and the level of national media interest, an emergency may also escalate to a full-blown crisis.

The Five Types of Crises

Facilities Crisis – Damage such as that caused by an explosion, fire, leakage, or natural disaster



Community Crisis – Adverse condition created by the organization or outside organization hostile to the agency or its mission

Employee Crisis – Includes loss of life, sabotage, or reduction in force



Consumer Crisis – Includes defective products, contracts that can't be met, or an allegation against your agency

Image Crisis – Includes unlawful or ill-perceived activities, such as sexual misconduct, drug use, or the indictment or arrest of senior agency official. This is the most difficult crisis to counteract.



Defining a Crisis

A crisis is defined as the point at which public reaction to an issue or an emergency threatens to jeopardize or significantly damage the reputation of an individual or organization. It represents a major turning point at which the magnitude of the situation escalates dramatically. It may be driven by factors such as, but not limited to:

- The number of casualties
- Its similarity to other recent incidents ("the latest in a series of crashes...")
- The level of national media interest.

It is sometimes difficult to recognize when an issue or emergency is escalating to crisis proportions. As a PAO it is essential that you monitor your operating environment, situational climate, and media activity for signs that a potential crisis is developing.

Pictured right, survivors of Hurricane Katrina paint a message on top of a building for rescuers to read. Katrina started out as an emergency, but quickly escalated into a crisis when the New Orleans levee system broke and emergency operations fell into disarray.



Time Elements of Crises

There are three time elements of crises for which public affairs practitioners must be aware and prepared. As we list them, think about when and how you need to generate and circulate public affairs guidance.

- Immediate crisis. Happens suddenly and unexpectedly. There is little or no time for research and planning. Examples: plane crashes, deaths, fire, etc.
- Emerging crisis. Allows more time for research and planning, but may erupt suddenly after brewing for long periods. Examples: moral issues, low troop or employee morale, sexual harassment in the workplace, etc.
- Sustained crisis. Those that persist for months or even years despite the best efforts of management. Examples: persistent rumors or speculation, allegations of the "good old boy network," hazing, sexual harassment, etc.



It is important to note that the difference between an issue and a crisis is that organizations try to eliminate any possibility of outrage concerning issues. Issues are proactive and crises are reactive in nature.

Effects of A Crisis

In today's society, crises are more visible and severe because of the 24-hour news cycle, creating greater concern for issues than ever before. More media outlets are covering events than ever before, and the current news cycle can create hysteria before an organization has a chance to plan accordingly.

The public has increased pressure for social responsibility of leaders and organizations. The aftermath of a crisis can have lasting effects on an organization, to include:

- Threatens the legitimacy of an organization. Examples: Three-mile Island, Tailhook, cheating at the service academies, investigation into the USS Iowa explosion, hazing at Marine 8th&I Barracks, the Abu Ghraib Prison Abuse Scandal
- It can reverse the mission of an organization. Examples: Some cynics think that fallout from the Tailhook incident has reversed the Navy's mission from power projection to political correctness, the Challenger explosion threatened NASA's mission of manned space exploration
- It disturbs an organization's sense of identity, self worth and pride. Examples: Marines spying at Moscow embassy, Air Force friendly fire incidents, sexual harassment at the Air Force Academy, reports of abuse in the Army of detainees and U.S. Army recruits.

Recognizing A Potential Crisis

Your role as a PAO will be to recognize when an issue is gathering enough attention to reach crisis proportions, or when an emergency has occurred with sufficient ramifications to constitute a crisis. To determine which issues or emergencies have the potential to become a crisis, consider these questions:

- Is your organization's reputation or credibility jeopardized? If the situation threatens the public's confidence in your organization, then it has the potential to become a crisis.
- Is there a high level of public interest in the issue or emergency? Are there many groups or audiences seeking information, or is there a relatively small audience? If there is a high level of interest, the situation can erupt into a crisis more quickly. Escalating media interest signals that an issue is becoming a crisis.
- Are you losing control of the flow of information? If people other than your public affairs staff are talking to the media about the issue or emergency, the media may be receiving misleading or inaccurate information. This can escalate the situation to a crisis level.
- Has your organization adopted a "siege mentality"? Is your organization simply waiting for the media interest to die down by taking a "no comment" approach, instead of discussing the issue with the media? These are all signs that the issue has escalated to the crisis stage.

Recognizing A Potential Crisis

There are certain issues and emergencies you will deal with that are likely to become crises:

- Aviation accidents, safety or security
- Anonymous accusers
- Environmental issues
- Sexual harassment
- Discrimination
- Waste fraud abuse
- Ethics violations
- Lawsuits and trials
- Whistle blowers, friendly fire incidents.



Why are these issues considered potential crises for an organization if not handled properly? News interest in these items is high based on what we've covered in the nature of news class. In addition, there are a number of pressure groups that will also bring more attention to these issues.

Recognizing A Potential Crisis

So far we have mentioned the types, effects, and characteristics of recognizing a crisis. And we have mentioned "if not handled properly" when we've discussed them. What exactly do we mean by that? Practitioners recognize seven common mistakes that lead to poor handling of crises.

- Hesitation – which leads to public perception of confusion, callousness, incompetence, or lack of preparation.
- Obscurity – which leads to the perception of dishonesty and insensitivity.
- Retaliation – which increases tension and intensifies emotion rather than reducing them.
- Fabrication – which creates the biggest problem, because nothing substitutes for truth.
- Pontification – which creates vulnerability by taking a high-handed approach without really dealing with the issue at hand.
- Confrontation – which provides others visibility by keeping the issue alive, giving them a platform, and giving them more to respond to.
- Litigation – which guarantees even greater visibility and may eliminate more reasonable solutions.

What role would you say the DOD's Principles of Information play in mitigating issues from escalating into a crisis? Remember, you are the public affairs expert for your command. You must be able to recognize these things and offer advice to your commander.

How to prevent a crisis from developing

The focus of the crisis communication function is to de-escalate the crisis through timely and effective communication methods. Successful handling of crises requires an ability to anticipate possible emergency scenarios, recognition of early stages of crises, and the capacity to respond immediately as part of a systematic crisis management planning process.

The key to anticipating and avoiding crises is assessing what can go wrong, what can affect people or the environment, and will create visibility.

- Identify things that can go wrong and become highly visible; assess vulnerabilities throughout the organization.
- Assign priorities based on which vulnerabilities are most urgent and most likely.
- Draft questions, answers, and resolutions for each potential crisis scenario.
- Focus on the two most important tasks – what to do and what to say – during the first critical hours following a crisis.
- Develop a strategy to contain and counteract, not react and respond. Use the four-step public affairs problem solving process as part of crisis communication.

Like issues management, crisis management refers to those prior actions taken before an issue, incident or accident focuses attention and scrutiny on your organization. Crisis management consists of preparation and planning using the public affairs four-step problem solving process (RPIE).

Your role as PAO is to ensure you have an up-to-date crisis communication plan in place. Take your organization's current crisis communication plan and make sure everything is correct to include who to contact internally, who to contact externally in the media and through the media.

The PAO as Crisis Advisor

When you see the signs of a potential crisis, your duty is to speak up-honestly and quickly. Remember it is not your crisis; it belongs to the commander. Your job is to support the decision-making process that explains:

- what went wrong, if it is a one-time problem or mistake
- how your command plans to address the problem.

The PAO as Crisis Advisor

Hiding the incident is not a good option - it WILL be found.

- Stress the need to communicate honestly. This is a hard one, particularly in legal cases or in instances where a senior officer made a big mistake. Saying the commander screwed up is not particularly career enhancing for a PAO.
- Give input on policies. Do not let other staff sections or commanders drive the policy. You are not a bystander to this process. Remember, the messages must be understood by the person sitting at home in front of a television or reading about this issue in the newspaper.
- Resist combative instinct (it is too late); show concern and willingness to improve future performance. The tone you set in your communications is, in some cases, the message. If need be, accept blame. Hard to do in some cases, but remember, the American public will forgive a mistake, but they won't forgive a cover-up.
- Use direct communications with important publics (internal and legislative). Basic human relations should tell you to deal personally with those most important to your organization. They have different information needs than the general public.

The PAO as Crisis Advisor



Remember to remind your commander that, while this issue may pose a significant challenge, it is also a great opportunity to do the "right thing." You may actually improve your reputation in the process. (Example: Based on actions taken to prevent future product tampering by Johnson and Johnson, Tylenol remains the number one pain reliever prescribed by doctors and hospitals.)

Crisis situations also give PAOs a chance to shine as true "operators" by focusing the commander's attention on PA actions. Your response and professionalism during a crisis will establish your credibility within the commander's staff and build you a good reputation.

Crisis Prevention

You now know the characteristics and warning signs of what constitutes a crisis and the role of the PAO is during a crisis. However, knowing is only half of crisis communication management. The other half is prevention, which is the proactive approach by your organization or command to handling a crisis. We are going to talk about the steps you need to take in the event an issue or emergency gets out of control and becomes a crisis.

Crisis Prevention

According to James Lukaszewski, Accredited Public Relations (APR) and member of the Public Relations Society of America and International Association of Business Communicators, the goal of a crisis management plan should be containment and positive counteraction. He lists five critical steps to effectively managing a crisis. Those steps are:

- Structure and plan. Hypothesize the worst scenarios and circumstances, and then the best possible outcomes. In structuring your plan, work backward from the outcome to identify the steps needed to reach the goal.
- Analyze and critique. Set up a crisis control committee and talk through the plan, event-by-event, situation-by-situation, and develop a schematic that “visualizes” how the plan works.
- Test and demonstrate. Conduct rehearsals or simulations as close to full-scale as possible.
- Establish contingencies. Include “what if’s.” Identify outside experts who can work side-by-side with your people before the situation gets out of control. Include them in your test and analyses, too.
- Coach and train spokespersons as quickly as possible, and routinely thereafter. They will lead, focus and control the organization’s crisis plan execution and reaction to crises.

We will talk about this process, not necessarily in this order, to mitigate the crisis.

Handling a Crisis

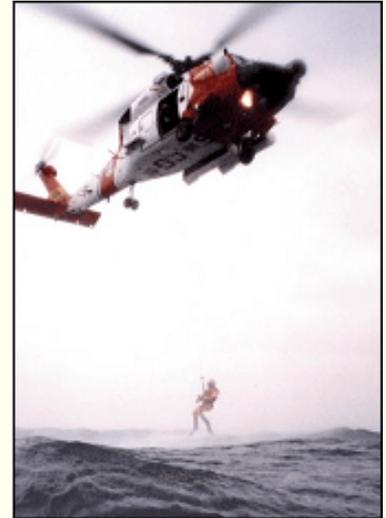
The way you want to structure and plan for a crisis is similar to the communication planning's [RPIE process](#), but your crisis plan will take a more tactical approach. Here are four things you must consider in structuring and writing a crisis communication plan:

- Assess Vulnerabilities - Identify things that can go wrong and become highly visible; assess vulnerabilities throughout the organization
- Assign Priorities - based on which are the most urgent
- Draft Q & R - for each potential crisis scenario
- Focus on 2 or 3 Command Messages – on what to say during the first critical hours following a crisis
- Develop a strategy – to contain and counteract, not react and respond.

Preparation

In preparing for a crisis, you must ensure that you:

- Develop your credibility and establish good working relationships with all internal and external people you count on for support. You have to be a trusted advisor to be an effective PAO. This means you must be in the information chain on all important matters; you must know key staff. You must be notified immediately when an accident or serious incident occurs.
- Take a good look at your organization's operations. If you're at one of the service academies, you should be concerned about issues likely to get attention there. For example, cheating, drug use, hazing and sexual harassment. Be on the lookout for others, but you should definitely have a plan for those. Likewise if you're at an air base, you should plan for things likely to occur there. What are the risks?
- Decide how to manage them with plans and procedures. Have plans for all foreseeable emergencies, and even talk about some odd cases to get ideas about what you'd do in those cases.
- Anticipate public interest Media and public officials may call you at home with news they heard over the scanner. You or someone on your staff needs to be accessible 24 hours a day.
- Coordinate and communicate your plan Your success is based on the ability of you and others to make the plan work. You need to share your plan, so that the military police don't start locking up media if you're not around.



These steps will set the foundation for an effective plan.

Planning

In most cases, your command will already have a crisis communication plan in place. What you must do is look at it to ensure it is current and identifies the right people for the right jobs. A previous command may have identified the chief of staff as the spokesperson because he was the best public speaker. Your current chief of staff may not have been.

Also, having up-to-date recall rosters and media call-out lists is critical. The telephone number you need in an emergency will most likely be the one you cannot find. Rosters should include all local commanders, PAOs at senior commands, PA representatives for other agencies (police, sheriff, county health, EPA, etc.) and local officials.



Planning

Modern technology enables PAOs to communicate more rapidly and efficiently than ever, if you plan accordingly. Some communications tools at your disposal:

- Web pages are good for updating information on developing situations. You can also point media to them for background information, hot-linking them to official sources of information.
- Cellular telephones obviously make communications much more flexible. Of course, you need a telephone directory for the crisis net.
- Voice mail is very useful in maintaining the routine office functions while you work the crisis.
- Burst fax machines speed the flow of information. Faxing news releases can be very time consuming.
- E-mail networks can streamline the coordination process and help keep everyone informed. Building a directory as the situation develops is a good idea.
- Command access television channels are a good means of keeping the internal (and shadow external) audience informed with official information. Remember, the internal audience has different needs than the general public.
- Digital camera gear adds flexibility and speed to your operation.

Training

When PAOs have reviewed existing crisis communication plans or written a new ones, they'll need to conduct training to test those plans. Make sure that everyone involved is ready to act and the proper flow of communication is in place. This is a quality assurance measure for a crisis communication plan.

- Exercise high-risk activities. Most air bases conduct mass casualty drills annually, and most bases practice theirs in preparation for an air show. If your command does something that is high risk, public affairs needs to practice emergency procedures with them.
- Brief likely crisis scenarios during office training. It is simple, easy and good training.
- Share your plan with the media. News agency can help you ensure your plan works by providing their input. Also, they'll already know what to do so you won't have to tell them during an emergency.
- Review your plan. The command's emergency plan was probably written before you arrived at the command—assume it's out of date. Measure the local media's perception of your public affairs office's performance during the last emergency. Use that information as a tool to adjust procedures and correct problems. Coordinate the plan with other staff sections to help ensure the plan's success.



When Accidents Strike



The PAO and staff's competence will weigh heavily on your command's success when an issue or emergency happens. Having a well practiced plan will help mitigate a potential crisis. However, your publics will only be as understanding or forgiving as past successes or failures dictate. PAOs must maintain a great relationship with the local command, community and the media.

PA Objectives in a Crisis

During a crisis situation, commanders often experience delays in obtaining real-time information. With the need to protect lives, safeguard operations, and conceal intentions, there is an inevitable delay in processing, reviewing, and releasing information. Commanders and public affairs officers should work to accomplish the mission while minimizing the lag between what is happening and what can be reported. Public Affairs objectives in crisis communication include:

- **Provide Accurate and Timely Information.** Accurate and timely information is essential to the public's understanding, morale, and resolve in times of crisis. Information introduced into the public realm has a powerful effect on each side's decision-making cycle during a crisis. Timely release of truthful information enables warfighters to stay aware of the latest developments in a crisis, frame the public debate, and make well-informed decisions.
- **Foster Public Trust and Support.** During national crisis, PA gives the American public the information needed to understand military roles and missions. Again, this is essential to the public's understanding, morale, and resolve in times of crisis.
 - The Public Affairs Officer's role in community relations during crises or contingencies is key in maintaining the public understanding and support necessary to sustain operations before, during and after a military campaign or operation.
 - Establishing the command information connection with forces and their families is increasingly important. The public affairs goal is to protect and promote the welfare of military members and their families.

PA Objectives in a Crisis

Maintain successful relationships with the media. Relationships between the military and the media are primarily based upon credibility and trust. Such relationships are normally built over time, not during a crisis or combat situation when the commander has a multitude of important issues vying for attention. As we've already discussed in Introduction to Media Relations, it is very important to establish a relationship with the media so they can help you communicate your messages to the public. If you haven't done so, begin right away – BEFORE a crisis!



National Response Plan (Civil Military Support)

The National Response Plan institutes an integrated concept - termed incident communication - as the approach used to manage communications with the public during incidents of national significance. Incident communications incorporates the following process:

Control. Identification of incident communications coordinating, primary and supporting departments and agency roles, and authorities for release of information.

Coordination. Specification of interagency coordination and plans, notification, activation, and supporting protocols.

Communications. Development of message content such as incident facts, health risk concerns, pre-incident and post-incident preparedness recommendations, warning issues, incident information, messages, audiences, and strategies for when, where, how, and by whom the messages will be delivered.

What the agencies do

Federal, State, local, and tribal authorities share responsibility for communicating information regarding the incident to the public. These actions are a critical component of incident management and must be fully integrated with all other operational actions to ensure the following objectives are met:

- Delivery of incident preparedness, health, response, and recovery instructions to those directly affected by the incident
- Dissemination of incident information to the general public.

During a national incident, the federal government operates as a team to ensure successful incident communications with the public. From initial notifications to final recovery actions, the federal team must operate and speak with a unified voice and consistent message that is coordinated not only with the different federal authorities involved in an incident, but also with affected state, local, and tribal authorities.

The Department of Homeland Security is the Lead Federal Agency (LFA) with all other agencies (government and non-governmental organizations) supporting its efforts.

The Department of Homeland Security and Public Affairs

The Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs is responsible for preparation, management, and maintenance of the National Response Plan – Incident Communications Emergency Policy and Procedures (NRP-ICEPP).

The NRP-ICEPP is comprised of two components of the NRP:

- **Public Affairs Support Annex** describes the interagency policies and procedures for incident and communications with the public.
- **Emergency Support Function #15 – External Affairs Annex** outlines resources and capabilities for public affairs.
 - Coordinates federal actions to provide the required external affairs support to federal, state, local and tribal incident management elements.
 - Applies to all federal departments and agencies that may require public affairs support or whose public affairs assets may be employed during an Incident of National Significance, and any National Oil and Hazardous Substance Pollution Contingency Plan (NCP) response or other event designated by the DHS where interagency coordination is required.
 - Organized into the following functional components: Public Affairs, Community Relations, Congressional Affairs, International Affairs, State and Local Coordination and Tribal Affairs.

The Department of Homeland Security and Public Affairs

During a national incident, federal, state, local, and tribal authorities share responsibility for communicating to the public information regarding the incident. These actions are a critical component of incident management and must be fully integrated with all other operational actions to ensure the following objectives are met:

- Delivery of incident preparedness, health, response, and recovery instructions to those directly affected by the incident; and
- Dissemination of incident information to the general public.

The Joint Information Center (JIC) structure provides a supporting mechanism to develop, coordinate, and deliver messages; it supports the Incident Command or Unified Command and the associated elements of the ICS.

Handling Accidents

If an accident happens and the media arrives on scene, public affairs will be responsible for facilitating their requests, and controlling access to the scene. Again, proper handling of the media will ensure the right messages get out.

- **Act quickly in communicating news of any adverse incident.** Maximum disclosure, minimum delay. The first news hour or two are critical in getting the word out and setting the record. The media can broadcast a story across the country within seconds. If the coverage is based on facts our organization has confirmed rather than on speculation by reporters, the news is likely to be more accurate and balanced. The first hour of an emergency response is critical to establishing the perception of our ability to manage a crisis.
- **Make sure you get news about a crisis out in accordance with service regulations.** Most service regulations have outlined when you need to get information out. The Air Force, Navy and Marines require one hour after PA office notification. The Army requires information be released as soon as possible. The Coast Guard requires you to get accurate information out in a timely manner.



Handling Accidents

- **Drive** the communication process proactively rather than in a merely reactive manner.
- **Use problem solving based on decision-making processes that management can support and use.** A strategic management decision-making framework that management can support involves the RPIE process. Include for your boss the following:
 - *Describe* the nature of the issue, problem or situation.
 - *Analyze* what the situation means, what its implications are, and how it threatens the organization.
 - *Develop* at least three response options for the situation presented from which leadership can choose. Three is optimal.
 - *Recommend* a course of action on what you should do and why.
 - Anticipate negative *Unintended Consequences*. The most useful options will be the ones that cause the fewest negative unintended consequences.
- **Make fundamentally sound decisions.** Fundamentally sound decision making involves simple, but subjective criteria based on SAPP and ACA restrictions (refer to Guidelines for Release unit), consultation with JAG and Operations, and finally, with your commander.

Handling Accidents

When the issue involves integrity or moral or ethical dilemmas, do the moral questioning quickly. When the public's deepest values are offended, extraordinarily fast action is required. It demands the moral courage to ask tough questions immediately and a commitment (with the strength of heart) powerful enough to take the most appropriate action promptly. It may be necessary to go to extremes as a matter of principle to counteract the negative impact of situations that the public, employees, and other audiences find morally troublesome.

- Local communication is best. Communication should be handled as close to the center of the impact or emergency as possible. Field operations and facilities managers, rather than the public affairs staff at headquarters, should speak, unless wide effects to the organization are anticipated.
- Maintain tight control over who speaks on behalf of the organization. Limit all media and public communications to one spokesperson wherever possible.
- Speak with one voice, but not necessarily with a single spokesperson. Consistency, accuracy, and promptness are important goals in communication with the media, employees, local officials, and others. Although the spokesperson can be flexible in the way information is presented to different audiences, messages should be consistent. In field and plant emergencies, headquarters should remain in frequent contact to ensure that everyone has the same information and that spokespersons are saying the same things at each location.

Handling Accidents

Utilize the public role of the commander to the maximum. That means making the commander visible early and at key announcement throughout the process.

- Especially important for major crisis. To instill public confidence in the operations you may need to put the highest level official out front of your organization.

Stay on Message. Never make accidental news. Rigorously brief key officials prior to any announcement and role-play all awkward questions to ensure consistency of messages. Coordinate information release using PAG, RTQs, fact sheets, press releases, etc. to ensure everyone is speaking with one voice.

Demonstrate caring about people. Recognize public anxiety; don't dismiss it.

Communicate with those most directly affected first. Your organization's first obligation is to the health, welfare, and safety of the people most directly affected, our employees, and the protection, restoration, and recovery of company operation.

- *Priority 1:* Those directly affected (victims, intended and unintended).
- *Priority 2:* Employees (sometimes they are victims, too)
- *Priority 3:* Those indirectly affected – neighbors, friends, families, relatives, customers, suppliers, government, regulators, third parties. The news media, and other channels of external communication. Make every effort to respond promptly to press inquiries and provide appropriate assistance, after having dealt first with those most directly affected.
- *Priority 4:* The news media and other channels of external communication.

Immediate PA Responsibilities

Make sure your planning includes what you and your staff must do when an emergency or crisis happens. Again, coordinated, planned actions correlate to competency and trust both internally and externally.

- Secure classified information. First, ask for cooperation and keep media from the scene. If media have already filmed classified materials, you should coordinate with the news outlet to ensure the material is not broadcast. In extreme cases, you can have the military police (on base) and local law enforcement (off base) confiscate film. If that fails, you can appeal to the reporter's editor, and lastly you can call the FBI. Publishing known classified information is a crime.
- Release unclassified information. It's why we're there.
- Provide media access to the scene. Even if that means just allowing media to film the scene from safe distance or actually visit the site, after the fact.



Media At the Scene



There are times when the media will expect to cover an event where personal risk is involved, i.e. accidents, fire, environmental contamination sites, etc. Safety of news media representatives is a PAO responsibility, particularly on base. Media representatives cannot waive this liability to get a good picture or video footage. There are a number of hazards associated with said accidents—ordnance, toxic chemicals, fuels, etc.

Security of the scene is important to the investigative process. PAOs should coordinate fully with other officials such as police (civilian or military) and the on-scene commander to understand security concerns and work with the media present to prevent security violations.

Media at the Scene

You will need to **have a clear understanding of whether the issue falls under civilian or military jurisdiction**, and which agencies have the lead responsibility for handling the matter. Jurisdiction will be a significant guide in determining the limits of your authority to answer questions and release information on the issue.

Restricting media access to a site because dead and injured are present may not be possible, as other activities at the site may be essential to the story. However, though it is not a crime to publish graphic images, PAOs must coordinate effectively with media representatives to ensure that images of the dead and injured are not distributed in a manner that violates propriety.

The Media

The media are the greatest factor in shaping public perception of a crisis response. Therefore, it is important to understand what the media do in the coverage of a crisis to mitigate and control information flow. The media:

- Find out about the crisis very quickly and often before you do
- Monitor each other and emergency communication channels
- Divert extra resources and personnel to cover the crisis
- Allot extra time and space for crisis coverage
- Go to the site before you do in large numbers
- Go where they want, unless clear boundaries have been established
- Probe for details
- Demand information
- Use their own knowledge, experience and archives
- Report what they know – quickly, constantly and endlessly
- Lay blame
- Perpetuate myths
- Report rumor

The DOD Principles of Information, found in the JP 3-61, were established to aide PAOs in counteracting the media's actions during a crisis.

Rules for Release

We have already talked about releasable and non-releasable information in the guidelines for release unit so we will quickly review what you must do in the event of an emergency when the media call.

- **Get the facts.** Collect and format the information into news releases, likely media questions and your proposed answers. (Security)
- **Get them straight.** Check them with the commander who owns the accident. First reports are nearly always wrong. (Security)
- **Get them to higher headquarters.** Releases are not typically forwarded for editing, and you do not want to delay a release any longer than absolutely needed. However, you **MUST** make sure your higher HQ has the same information to put out, so it is all the same, accurate information. (Accuracy and Authority)
- **Get it out.** Release information to the wires or whatever means best suits your needs for quick dissemination. (Maximum Disclosure, Minimum Delay)

The Initial Release

Once you have gathered all the preliminary information you must release as much information as possible – maximum disclosure, minimum delay. Get the information out as soon as possible or the media will get it from somewhere else, and it will probably not be the information you want released.

- Release it as soon as possible (Be first with the news). Provide the obvious while you are working on it. "We've had an accident, and are working to gather the facts."
- Put as much accurate information as you can in it. You will be saving yourself time and effort answering a bunch of questions after you send it out.
- Release of names and other information was covered in the Guidelines for Release unit. Beware of releasing information protected by the Privacy Act or service policy.

Dealing with Major Issues, Incidents and Accidents



Some incidents can become crises quite suddenly. For example, the collision of an F-16 and a C-130 at Pope Air Force Base, N.C., caused an immediate crisis because of the massive loss of life. In these cases, preparation couldn't prevent the crisis, but did help decrease its impact on the public's perception of the military.

Managing a crisis situation can be complicated because of the many audiences and the effort it takes to handle media and public requests. You must plan ahead and delegate responsibilities appropriately so that you are prepared to handle a crisis.

Dealing with Major Issues, Incidents and Accidents

Research which potential audiences you will have to communicate with during a crisis. You will have to respond to internal audiences such as service members and their friends and families. In addition, you'll have to communicate with external audiences, such as the news media and the local community. Assess their information needs and tailor your release of information to meet the requirements of these audiences. Remember, this does not mean putting out multiple releases, but taking all audiences into consideration when communicating.

Personnel management is an issue that tends to be overlooked during crisis situations. Your staff cannot be expected to work long, productive hours indefinitely. Such extended schedules will eventually result in mistakes. Make sure that someone is in charge of shift changes and communicating with the staff. In times of crisis it may also be necessary to provide counseling for stressed or depressed workers. Delegating duties equitably is a critical duty for the PAO.

After the Crisis

The public affairs office should make sure it evaluates its crisis communication response and plan the same way it would any other communication plan. Readjusting your efforts based on what did and didn't work is the best way to improve on the process. Once a crisis is complete, ensure you:

- provide closure if possible. Although many issues may remain following a crisis, a good means of providing closure is to highlight the return to normal operations with media coverage.
- recognize the contributions of people inside and outside the organization. It is a good way to build on relations developed during the crisis. Don't forget your own staff.
- evaluate the effectiveness of your actions. This will lead to better future performance by your organization and others (if you share the information). Consider writing it up for DINFOS or your service PA publication.

Unit Summary

As a PAO, it will be your responsibility to alert your commander when a situation is reaching the crisis stage. Knowing the difference between each of these situations will help you monitor potential crises, prepare for them and respond quickly.

Be proactive. Know ahead of time what your objectives and responsibilities are so that if a crisis occurs, you can respond promptly. Know what your initial actions should be, and know your priorities. Remember that in a crisis situation, the sooner you get your message out, the more credibility your command will have. Responding quickly shows that your staff is organized and efficient, which further adds to your credibility.

Unit Summary

When a crisis does occur, the manner in which you respond will set the tone for how your message will be received by the media and the public.

Anticipating and planning for a crisis before it occurs are crucial steps in ensuring a quick and efficient response to a real crisis situation. Know beforehand which issues and emergencies are likely to become crises. Have a crisis response plan ready and train your personnel on it before the crisis occurs. During a crisis, communicate the facts and the steps being taken to handle the situation. A quick, honest and credible response will create a positive impression of your organization.