

Crisis communication

V. HOT TOPICS
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Faked research results, an explosion in the chemistry lab, improper animal testing, data theft or workplace bullying – any incident in the scientific community can become a crisis that happens unexpectedly, leads to instability and criticism, and threatens operations, personal and institutional reputation, or even health and life. You don't want a crisis, but it can't be ruled out.

The goal of crisis communication is to minimise the perception of an incident as a crisis and thereby help to manage and overcome the incident. This does not mean lying or hiding grievances, but trying to stay operational and prevent a situation from escalating further. Because crises create an immediate need for information, this calls for quick action. The key is to communicate proactively and with a single voice, thereby controlling the interpretation of the incident. If an issue is likely to be reported in the media, you should be the first to break the news. Those who stay silent will lose control and trust. Competitors, the media or politicians will fill the vacuum with their own version of events.

Even if the expected crisis never happens, institutions should plan for the worst. This is mainly the responsibility of the management. Ideally, a university or research institution will have a crisis manual with protocols, roles and messages for the scenarios most likely to occur and most damaging to its reputation. Well-trained teams, checklists, pro-forma statements and pre-designed websites are of great help. If you are a researcher and a crisis occurs, contact your institution's press office early, utilise their expertise and develop a plan together: How can the crisis be managed? What are the potential threats? What questions are likely to be asked, and what would your answers and arguments be?



In an actual crisis, you should cooperate with the management but should also expect support. Crisis communication is a team effort. The press office needs to be involved, statements need to be agreed and a spokesperson needs to be nominated. The spokesperson needs to keep a cool head and a calm tone: Stick to the facts. Depending on the case, consider taking legal advice. Do not speculate or publicly accuse third parties. If false rumours are circulating, correct them promptly. Make it clear that the problem is being dealt with and say what remedial action has been taken or is planned. Show empathy towards those affected. Always inform internal staff first and keep all relevant stakeholders updated. There is a lot to do and to keep in mind – but remember: You're not alone.



Recommended reads:

- ◆ Coombs W. T. (2021), *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing and Responding*. Sage. ISBN: 9781483322674
- ◆ Swedish Emergency Management Agency (Ed.) (2008), *Crisis Communication Handbook*. NRS Tryckeri, Huskvarna. ISBN: 978-91-85797-11-0 (download: <https://www.msb.se/RibData/Filer/pdf/z3992.pdf>)
- ◆ Gigliotti R.A. (2019), *Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Theory and Practice*. Rutgers University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvscxrro>