

PICKING UP THE PIECES

PROVIDING EFFECTIVE
HR LEADERSHIP IN A CRISIS

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The unthinkable has happened. Now what?

Whether your organization faces a PR scandal, a controversial executive departure, a natural disaster or anything else that tests your values as an organization, how do you provide continuity as an HR executive? This guide will help you assess the crisis, deploy resources effectively and support your employees through a difficult period.

While every crisis has its own unique challenges, the following five-step model will help you stay focused on what matters most—the well-being of your employees—as the situation unfolds.

Step [#]1 Assess the Situation—Fast

You don't have the luxury of carefully studying a crisis. You need to move quickly to understand the situation and identify potential responses.

First, get the big picture before breaking it down into smaller components. Ask yourself: What is the situation? What information do we have? And how credible is this information?

And even if you have a crisis plan, be adaptable.

“When there’s a crisis, know who you need to get into the room to talk strategy and what questions you want to ask—not ‘where’s the binder that tells us who to text,’ ” advises Caitlin Harper, founder of Commcoterie, a change management communication consultancy. “The strategy can’t be the same for every crisis—that’s the nature of a crisis.”





Step 2 Facilitate Honest Communication

Communicating—*honestly and quickly*—is critical in a crisis.

“The worst thing you can do is wait and wait when everyone is uncomfortable and knows something is happening,” Harper says. “Meanwhile, communicating honestly shows respect and establishes trust.”

You’ll want to work with PR to craft communication and make sure you’re aligned with what you’re saying about the crisis and what the company is doing about it—especially if a PR crisis is brewing.¹ **The key here is to make sure your message is consistent.** However, remember that you’re both ultimately speaking to different audiences.

Be upfront with your team before going to the public. You don’t want your staff to learn about a crisis from a tweet or press release. Doing so would “be like if you broke up with someone and you told everyone else except for them,” Harper says.

You also **don't want to regurgitate the information from a press release to your employees**. As Harper notes, “the way you communicate externally is not the way you communicate internally.” The difference: the external communication speaks to the impact, but internal communication speaks to the ones impacted. For similar reasons, you should be flexible with any preset crisis communication plans, which, according to Harper, tend to be full of jargon and become obsolete once written.

Instead, Harper suggests **considering employees' reactions to this specific news**. Ask yourself, “What will employees' reaction be when receiving this messaging?” Use this insight to frame your message—and get ahead of employees' questions.

Don't have all of the answers? Say that.

“Often leaders tell me they don't know what the message should be because they don't have answers,” Harper shares. In those situations, Harper instructs leaders that is the message (even if they're uncomfortable saying it).

Alternatively, Harper suggests **sharing the strategy for when you do have facts** so people know what they can expect to hear.

And while an internal crisis communication plan could involve any number of steps, Harper says they're all in service of the same goal. “The only step is to **continue to re-center the employee at every turn**,” she says.

Pro tip:

If you get pushback, push right back.

“It's HR leaders' responsibility to be the person who asks other leaders consistently, ‘How are we communicating this to the team? And what can we tell the team?’ ” Harper urges. “If you're not in the room where it happens, find a pain point, then poke at it until they hear you.”

Step [#]3 Promote Available Resources

It's vital to promote your resources after activating a response.

First, **consider the scope of the crisis.** For the broader organization, resources may be more generic. For example, if one team experiences a cyberattack, the organization can send guidelines to enhance security across the organization.

Consider added resources if the situation has a local element. Take the war in Ukraine as an example.² All employees will want to understand how to support affected colleagues, but those directly impacted by the war require a more targeted response. You could also **mobilize a dedicated response team** to ensure everyone affected gets the necessary resources.

Whatever the resources, **communicate them where your people are.** “Sometimes C-suite leaders will say, *‘I want to send an email,’* but their entire company is in Slack,” Harper shares. “They see Slack as only for cat pictures, and I point out how sometimes you have to put important info in a cat Slack channel if that’s where you know everyone is.”

It’s also essential to **use multi-channel messaging** to get the message out about available resources, Harper says. “If you send something out once, that’s nothing; three times at least—and in different mediums.”

You can also **lean on manager messaging** (aka key information shared with managers to filter through their teams). Doing so ensures team members know what resources are available, a method Cynthia Kenny, HR thought leader and consultant, found successful mid-crisis, along with training and providing talking notes so leaders know how to speak to staff and continue to push resources down the chain of command.

And if you're a smaller company with fewer resources, **perform contingency planning beforehand**. Having resources that you can tap into quickly is critical because you never know when a crisis will happen. Whether it's an unexpected round of layoffs or a loss of life, consider having a company on retainer with resources you can pull from and mobilize quickly, such as mental health support.

Pro tip:

Take advantage of the available resources to care for yourself as an HR leader. Because if you're not in a good place, you won't be able to get your team into a good place, either. Think of it like in the event of a loss of cabin pressure on an airplane; you must put the oxygen mask on first before helping others.



Step [#]4 Model Supportive Leadership Skills

During a crisis, a handful of crucial leadership skills will get you and your team through it.

One essential leadership skill to employ is **delegation**. You can't—and shouldn't have to—fix the crisis alone. Get your key stakeholders or response team into a room and tell them precisely what you need from them. Be brief enough so they don't get lost in the details but specific enough to know what to do when leaving the room.

If needed, a dedicated response team can stay behind to determine what must happen next to support the business and create a schedule to make it happen. Conversely, remember to delegate and remove things from one's plate if they're directly affected.

Another leadership skill to tap into is **transparency**. "It's okay to be transparent and say, 'I know this isn't built to be comfortable, but here's what we can do, and we do it together,'" says Kenny, who also points to **inclusivity**.





“Not only do you want to use language that emphasizes ‘we’re in this together,’ but you also make sure not to leave people out—even if you think you’re protecting them,” Kenny says. “It’s part of our humanness to want to be included, and it doesn’t feel good when we’re not ... even in a crisis.”

Finally, model **self-control**. Be the leader aiming the flashlight at the exit rather than shouting in the dark. Your self-control will trickle down and make people trust that leadership is handling the crisis.

Pro tip: When in doubt, lean on your values. “A good HR program integrates values in everything you do,” Kenny says. And when you’re unsure how to act, lean on your values to re-center yourself on what the company stands for and the people who stand by it.

Step #5

Offer Focused Support After the Crisis

Your job does not end when the crisis does.

If the crisis is local, make sure employees have enough **ongoing support**. If you know it's a crisis that isn't ending anytime soon (e.g., a war or major natural disaster relief effort), consider the long-term resources you'll need, including internal support and how you plan to rotate people in and out.

From there, **check in with the team**. Go back to see how people are doing, and assess their response to your response efforts. In some cases, there may be lingering dissatisfaction or disappointment. If you find the way the organization handled the crisis had a negative cultural impact, "you must rebuild those bridges and do it in a way that is honest for your company," Harper says.

Take the check-in further with the leadership team and get in a room to actually **discuss the crisis**. Yes, it will most likely be painful and uncomfortable to talk about it, but it's important for the longevity and resilience of the organization.

In this conversation, look at how you approached the crisis and what you can do better next time. "It's not about replicating the response; it's finding the gaps," Harper says. Finally, **assess your policies**. "What policies were activated in crisis mode that must be adjusted or explained to everyone?" Harper posits.



In terms of how you conduct these conversations, experts at Google suggest focusing on improvement and resilience as well as encouraging blameless and constructive feedback to solicit lessons from failure.³

And whatever you find from this exercise, don't forget to communicate it to the team. Tell them what went right. Tell them what went wrong. Tell them what you're doing now. And tell them what you'll do differently next time.

Final pro tip:
Check in with yourself.

You've been running at full speed trying to attack the crisis, and then one day, it's over, or at least manageable, and you may not remember what a "normal" pace is. Assess the crisis's impact on you and take what you need to continue to lead.

End Notes

1. O'Connell B. (2021) Risk Managers: What's Your Plan for a Public Relations Crisis? <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/people-managers/pages/handling-a-pr-crisis-.aspx>
2. Health Action Alliance and the SHRM Foundation (2022) War in Ukraine: How Business Leaders Can Support Employees Affected by the Crisis <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/global-hr/pages/war-in-ukraine-how-business-leaders-can-support-employees-affected-by-the-crisis.aspx>
3. <https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/postmortem-culture-how-you-can-learn-from-failure/>





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