

Crisis Communication Debrief and Review during a Crisis Response

Background

Debriefing and reviewing the communication approach and activity both during and after a crisis is critical. It ensures that you are capturing the learning throughout the crisis which will become the basis of how to develop and revise crisis communication plans. But it also ensures that you are reviewing and evaluating the impact of the communication approach and activity. Debriefing against an existing plan is good practice but if there is no existing crisis communication plan it is still essential to develop the approach and plan for the future. It is essential to keep a log and notes of your debrief, reviews and information you collate. For more information see the Planning for the Future section

In the emergency services and military, every significant activity or operation is followed straight after by a debrief which will look at what went well and where the approach could be improved for the future. During the time of a crisis there will be 'hot debriefs', also known as 'hot wash-ups' that take place to quickly document the learning while the events are unfolding.

Some organisations have a formal debrief process that has been outlined, for example the UK College of Policing has documented a formal structured debrief process where trained staff can be brought in to assist the debrief to take place. However, a debrief can be undertaken to fit the time and resources that you have available.

Debriefing communication activity should include all aspects of the work that has been undertaken including external communication, PR, media relations, internal communication, stakeholder communication, social media activity, advertising and any other communication activity. The debriefing should include monitoring any public/social media response to your activity.

The important thing is to recognise that some form of review or debrief should take place quickly in the early stages of a crisis even daily if possible. This can move to weekly or fortnightly as the crisis subsides and there is a move to recovery. Debriefs should continue through to the conclusion of the crisis and into recovery.

It is best practice to ensure that decisions that are made and significant actions are logged so that there is an accountability. Find a routine within your working day and week where you can include hot debriefs and reflection on the situation. This would be invaluable should there be any form of public inquiry or other investigation into what happened at what point and with what level of authorisation.

Types of debrief and review

1. Hot debrief – this is undertaken during the crisis and will provide a way of documenting key actions, learning and decision making
2. Formal debrief – a detailed evaluation of the response and how it worked building on all the elements outlined in the hot debriefs that have taken place
3. Review – a quick evaluation of the impact of the communication activity, key messaging and approach within the crisis communication plan

How to run a Hot Debrief

1. Decide who should take part and how often the meetings will take place. Those who take part should have had significant roles within the communication development and delivery, but you may need to call on other members of the team for their input.
2. Explain to those who will be asked to take part the purpose of a 'hot debrief' which is about learning and not blame
3. Ask communication staff to provide short answers to three key questions
 - Start with five things they felt worked well
 - Second ask them to state five things they felt could be improved
 - Finally, ask for five things that could be done differently
4. If this is done through email, then collate the information and keep it in a file so you can add further debrief documents to it in the coming weeks.
5. Check before you file the information to see if there are any immediate actions that need to be undertaken
6. If you decide to have a video conference with people structure the meeting so that once a point has been made you move on to another and people add but don't restate points. The agenda should cover the three key questions followed by a roundup of key items noted to be added to the debrief/lessons learned log, and then what happens next. (For an example agenda see Appendix A)
7. Be clear about the length of time that is available – limit to an hour – and keep the debrief to time
8. Ensure, if this is a virtual or face-to-face group meeting, that you have a note taker to capture what is said. If it is using Zoom or MS Teams, there is an opportunity to record but you may still want to make some notes as a back-up.
9. Make sure people know how they can add to the document if they suddenly remember an important point at a later date.

How to run a Formal Debrief

A formal debrief should be undertaken once the crisis phase is concluding and the organisation is moving into the recovery phase. It should not be carried out too early as the debrief will not be as effective in gathering all the learning if significant developments are still taking place.

Running a formal debrief requires specific skills and experience so it may be beneficial to ask a trained individual or someone who has undertaken formal debriefs before to facilitate the meeting. At least half a day should be set aside to carry out a formal debrief looking at all aspects of communication: activity planning, delivery, how teams worked together, evaluation, lessons identified for next time.

It will again focus on the three important questions – what worked, what could be improved and what would be done differently in future. However, it will be able to take the themes from what has been brought to the fore from the hot debriefs.

As it is being undertaken after the conclusion of the crisis, it can include data and analytics about the communication response, feedback from key groups including local people, media and stakeholders, and the details of the hot debriefs.

It may be beneficial to run a formal debrief with partner agencies to look at the learning around the communication and the co-ordination across agencies. It may also be helpful to run a debrief with the media to look at what worked and what could be improved. And if you have access to public panels and local community groups it would be worthwhile asking them for feedback on the response, with communication being an important element.

Reviewing communication activity

If a debrief is focused on what has happened and then building the learning into the future of crisis communication plans, then reviewing communication activity is about assessing what has been achieved and what is required in the next phase of the communication. This should happen throughout the crisis using data, analytics and feedback to inform the review.

The aim of this is to ensure that your communication is reaching the right audience and that it is having the required impact.

Planning for the future

Gather all the learning from the hot debriefs, formal debrief and review of communication to consider the implications for the future of your communication. It may provide action points which need to be undertaken to develop and improve the communication approach. The key themes can also form part of your reports on the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic communication program to executive management teams and Boards, as well any external multi-agency groups you may be part of.

If there are several action points, then ensure that you are tracking their progress and that there are deadlines for completion. In many cases, the organisation will be mapping the improvement points across the business and communication will feed into that.

Ensure you use the information to review, develop and improve the crisis communication strategy and associated plans. This will ensure the learning has been maximised and the strategy and plans will be in a better position for the future. It will also assist the development of the organisation's communication strategy and approach. This will be needed for the move through recovery and back into more 'normal' business operations.

The notes and information from the debriefs and reviews should be retained together with any contemporaneous logs of decision making in case they are required for future reviews, inquiries or considerations. They may be required for Freedom of Information requests, reviews of local or regional multi-agency lessons learned reviews or debriefs, or local MPs or national Government enquiries. It would be beneficial to retain for at least six years.

Further information
Contact the CIPR LPS group

Appendix A

Sample Hot Debrief Agenda

AGENDA

Date:

Time:

Location:

Attendees:

Introduction:

State name and role in dealing with the crisis

What worked well:

Each attendee to have five points to be provided on the communication response

What needed to improve:

Each attendee to have five points of challenges that were faced

What could be done differently:

Each attendee to have ideas about what should change for the response and the future activity

Round-up and actions:

Themes to be pulled together by the Chair of the debrief together with any urgent actions and who is responsible for them

Next meeting:

Fix a date or time for the next debrief