

A CAPRICORN CONSULTING FIELD KIT

Before It Breaks

The crisis communications kit for organizations without a comms team.
Or with a lean one. Or a busy one that needs a shared playbook.

Ten pages. One afternoon. By the end, you will have a working holding statement, a stakeholder map, a spokesperson plan, and a first-24-hours checklist your whole team can follow.



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MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

Most organizations discover they need crisis communications after the crisis

A crisis does not wait for you to have a communications department. It arrives on a Tuesday afternoon, usually through a phone call, a screenshot, or an email with a subject line you were not expecting. What you do in the next few hours shapes how the next few years remember it.

49%

Fewer than half of surveyed US companies have a formal, documented crisis communications plan.

Capterra Crisis Communications Survey, 2023

75%

Three in four US nonprofits reported at least one organizational crisis within a two-year period.

Fuller & La Sala, national survey of 2,005 charitable organizations, SAGE Open, 2021

The gap between those two numbers is where reputations get damaged. Crises are common. Preparation is not. And preparation is what makes the difference between an organization that looks steady under pressure and one that looks like it is hiding something.

Who this kit is for

- **No comms team.** You are a founder, director, or operations lead, and communications lands on you when things go wrong. This kit is your plan.
- **A lean comms team.** One or two people covering everything from newsletters to media. Use this kit as your pre-agreed crisis playbook, so decisions are made before the pressure starts.
- **A busy comms team.** You know this material, but it lives in your head. Use the kit to put it on paper, so the response does not depend on you being reachable.

WHAT THIS KIT IS NOT

It is not legal advice, and it does not replace emergency services or your own judgment when people are in danger. In any situation involving harm or risk to people, safety actions come before communications, every time. When legal exposure is possible, have a lawyer see your statement before it goes out, but do not let that become a reason for silence.

What counts as a crisis, and what does not

Not everything uncomfortable is a crisis. Treating every complaint like a five-alarm fire burns out a small team and trains people to ignore real alarms. A working definition:

A crisis is any event that threatens people, operations, or trust faster than your normal ways of working can respond.

Level	What it looks like	Your response posture
ISSUE	A critical comment online, a routine complaint, a difficult question from a partner or client.	Respond through normal channels, normal tone, normal speed. Log it. Watch whether it repeats.
INCIDENT	A service failure, a minor accident, a factual error published, a heated dispute becoming visible.	One person coordinates. Inform affected stakeholders directly. Prepare a holding statement, even if you never use it.
CRISIS	Harm or risk to people, a serious allegation, a data breach, media attention, anything that could reach your funders, clients, or community before you do.	Activate this kit in full. First 24 hours checklist, holding statement, stakeholder calls, one spokesperson.

The two-question test

When something lands and you are unsure, ask:

1. **Is anyone harmed, or at risk of harm?** If yes, it is a crisis. Act on safety first, communicate second.
2. **Could this reach the people whose trust we depend on before we reach them?** Funders, clients, board, regulators, the community you serve, journalists. If yes, it is at least an incident, and the clock is running.

THE ONE RULE OF TRIAGE

When in doubt, treat it one level higher for the first 24 hours. It costs you a little effort to stand down from an over-response. It can cost you years to recover from an under-response.

The first 24 hours, hour by hour

HOUR 0–1

People and facts.

- Safety actions first. Nothing in this kit comes before helping people.
- Write down three lists: what we know, what we do not know, when we expect to know more. Update them as facts arrive.
- Name one coordinator. Not necessarily the most senior person, but the calmest organized one. Everything routes through them.
- Start a log: time, what happened, what was decided, who was told. A shared document is enough.

HOUR 1–3

Get your own house in order.

- Pause all scheduled posts, newsletters, and campaigns. A cheerful auto-post during a crisis reads as indifference.
- Brief your staff before anyone outside. One short message: here is what we know, here is who speaks for us, please do not comment or speculate anywhere, forward every inquiry to the coordinator.
- Decide your spokesperson and deputy (page 7).

HOUR 3–6

Reach the people who matter, directly.

- Finalize the holding statement (page 5). Legal review if needed, fast.
- Call or personally message your priority stakeholders from the map on page 8. Funders, key clients, board members, and close partners should hear it from you, not from a news alert or a WhatsApp forward.
- Publish the holding statement only where the crisis is visible. Do not amplify a local issue into a global one.

HOUR 6–24

Set a rhythm and keep it.

- Say when the next update will come, then deliver it on time even if the update is "we are still verifying."
- Monitor mentions, inboxes, and calls. Correct factual errors quickly and calmly. Do not argue with opinions.
- Keep the log current. It protects you later and makes the debrief honest.

THE ORDER MATTERS

Staff before stakeholders. Stakeholders before the public. The public before the media chase you.

Every reversal of this order creates a person who feels they deserved to hear it from you and did not.

The holding statement

A holding statement is not the full story. It is an honest first response that buys you time to establish facts without looking silent or evasive. It has five parts, in order:

1. **Acknowledge.** Say plainly what has happened, at the level of certainty you actually have.
2. **People first.** Show that your first concern is the people affected, and mean it.
3. **Action.** Say what you are doing right now.
4. **Honesty about limits.** Say what you do not yet know. This builds more trust than false confidence.
5. **Next update.** Say when and where you will say more. Then keep that promise.

We are aware of what happened, in plain words at location / service / programme on date .

Our first concern is the people affected: staff, participants, customers, community , and we are
the immediate action: supporting them, on site, in contact with authorities .

We are working to establish the full facts. At this stage we do not yet know
the honest gap: cause, extent, timeline , and we will not speculate.

We will share a further update by specific time at specific place: website, page, contact . For
questions, please contact name, role, email/phone .

RULES THAT KEEP YOU SAFE

- Under 150 words.
- No speculation about cause. Ever.
- No blame, of anyone, in the first statement.
- Never "no comment." It translates as "we are hiding something."

SOUND LIKE A PERSON

"We are sorry" beats "we regret any inconvenience caused." "We are trying to understand what happened" beats "an investigation has been initiated." Corporate phrasing in a human moment reads as coldness, and coldness is remembered.

Two worked examples

Both organizations below are fictional. Notice that each statement follows the same five-part spine, in the same order, in fewer than 150 words.

EXAMPLE A · SMALL NGO · INCIDENT AT A PARTNER SITE

"We are aware of an accident this morning at a partner facility in Rajpur where our skills-training programme operates. Two participants received medical attention and are now stable. Our first concern is their wellbeing and that of their families, and our team is with them at the facility now. We are working with the facility management and local authorities to understand exactly what happened. We do not yet know the cause, and we will not speculate before the facts are established. We will share a further update by 6 pm today on this page. Families and partners with questions can reach our programme director, Asha Verma, at the number below."

Why it works: it is specific about what is known (two people, stable, team on site), honest about what is not (cause), warm without being dramatic, and it makes one concrete promise it can keep.

EXAMPLE B · SMALL BUSINESS · DATA INCIDENT

"On Thursday evening we identified unauthorized access to one of our systems containing customer contact details. We took the system offline within the hour and engaged an independent security specialist. Our first responsibility is to the customers whose information may be affected, and we are contacting each of them directly today with specific guidance. At this stage we have no evidence that payment information was involved, but our review is ongoing and we will say so plainly if that changes. We will publish a full update by Monday, 10 am, on our website. If you are a customer with questions before then, please write to us at care@ourcompany.com and a member of our team, not an automated reply, will respond."

Why it works: it leads with action already taken, distinguishes evidence from certainty ("no evidence that" is honest; "definitely not" would be a guess), and the last line quietly signals that real people are handling it.

DO THIS NOW

You will never write a good holding statement at midnight with your phone buzzing. Pre-draft the skeleton for your two most likely scenarios this afternoon (page 9). When the day comes, you will be editing, not inventing.

Spokesperson discipline

One organization, one voice. In a crisis, mixed messages do more damage than bad news. Choose one spokesperson and one deputy, in advance. The right person is senior enough to carry authority, calm under questioning, and willing to be briefed. That is not always the founder, and it does not need to be.

Everyone else gets one line

"I'm not the right person to speak on this. Our statement is at [place], and [name] can help you with anything further."

Give this sentence to every staff member, board member, and volunteer in your hour 1–3 internal note. It is not a gag order. It is protection, for them and for the people affected, from well-intentioned improvisation.

Say	Never say
"Here is what we know so far."	"No comment."
"I don't know yet, and I will come back to you by [time]." Then do.	Guesses dressed up as facts.
"Our first concern is the people affected."	"This is being blown out of proportion."
"That is an important question, and the honest answer is that we are still establishing it."	Anything that blames a specific person, partner, or victim before facts are established.
"We were wrong about [x], and here is the corrected information."	"Mistakes were made." Passive voice reads as evasion.

Bridging phrases that keep you steady

- "What I can tell you is..."
- "It is too early to confirm that. What we are doing right now is..."
- "The most important thing at this moment is..."
- "Let me be precise about what we know and what we do not."

THREE MEDIA RULES FOR PEOPLE WHO RARELY FACE MEDIA

1. Nothing is off the record. Assume everything you say near a journalist can be printed. **2.** You are allowed to pause before answering. Silence feels longer to you than to anyone else. **3.** You are allowed to end an interview politely. "That is everything I can share right now, and our next update is at [time]" is a complete answer.

The stakeholder map

The people who fund you and the people you serve should never learn about your crisis from the news, or from someone else's post. This map is the difference. Fill it in this afternoon, while nothing is wrong. In a crisis, work down the "When" column in order.

Stakeholder	Why they matter	Who contacts them	Channel	When
Staff and volunteers	They will be asked. They need the facts and the one-line script.	Coordinator	All-team message + call for those directly involved	First, always (hour 1–3)
Board / trustees / owners	Governance duty; they must never be surprised.	Director / founder	Phone call	Hour 1–3
Funders / key clients	Trust is the relationship. A direct call protects it.	Director or relationship holder	Phone, then email confirming	Hour 3–6, before anything public
People you serve / customers	They are affected, or worried they might be.	Programme / service lead	Direct message, community meeting, or notice	Hour 3–6
Partners and suppliers	They may be implicated, affected, or asked to comment.	Relationship holder	Phone or email	Hour 3–6
Regulator / authorities	Some incidents carry a legal duty to report. Know yours in advance.	Director, with legal advice	As prescribed	As required by law
Local community	They live next to the story and talk to journalists.	Most trusted local face	In person where possible	Hour 6–24
Media	They will write the story with or without you. With you is better.	Spokesperson only	Holding statement, then interviews if warranted	When they ask, or when the story is already public

MAKE IT REAL

A map without phone numbers is decoration. Next to each row, write an actual name and an actual number, and store the completed map with your crisis card (page 9), somewhere at least three people can find without asking you.

The afternoon plan: prepared in 90 minutes

Everything above becomes real in one working session. Book 90 minutes, ideally with one colleague, and work through these five blocks. Done beats perfect.

- 1** **20 MINUTES**
List your five most likely crises. Prompts: a safety incident involving staff or the people you serve; a serious allegation against a staff member; losing a major funder or client in a way that becomes public; a data breach; a social media pile-on; a partner or supplier failure that lands on you. Rank them by likelihood.
- 2** **20 MINUTES**
Fill the stakeholder map (page 8) with real names, real numbers, and the order of contact. Assign who calls whom.
- 3** **20 MINUTES**
Pre-draft holding statement skeletons for your top two scenarios, using the template on page 5. Leave the blanks blank. You are building the frame, not predicting the future.
- 4** **15 MINUTES**
Choose spokesperson and deputy, and write the one-line script for everyone else (page 7). Tell both people they have the role. A spokesperson who learns of the job during the crisis is not a plan.
- 5** **15 MINUTES**
Build the one-page crisis card: coordinator name, spokesperson and deputy with numbers, where the statements and map live, who holds the passwords to your website and social accounts, your lawyer or legal contact if you have one. Print it. Store it where at least three people can find it.

THEN PROTECT THE WORK

Put a 30-minute review in the calendar every six months. People change roles, numbers change, risks change. An out-of-date plan fails quietly at the worst moment, and you will not know until you need it.

After the crisis, and the mistakes to avoid

When it is over

- **Keep every promise you made under pressure.** Updates, follow-ups, callbacks. Trust is rebuilt in the follow-through, not the statement.
- **Debrief within two weeks**, while memories are honest. What did we know and when, what worked, what did not, what does the kit need. Update the kit the same day.
- **Thank the people who carried it:** the staff who held the line, the partners who stood by you, the stakeholders who gave you the benefit of the doubt.
- **Tell the recovery story only when it is genuinely over**, and center the people affected, not the organization. Told too early, it reads as spin. Told well, it becomes part of why people trust you.

The five mistakes that do the most damage

Mistake	Why it hurts
Silence	The story gets written without you, by whoever is loudest.
Speed without facts	A fast wrong statement forces a correction, and corrections are the headlines people remember.
Blaming first	Even when someone else is at fault, leading with blame reads as dodging responsibility for the people affected.
Legal tone in a human moment	Cold language in a warm moment is what turns an incident into a reputation story.
Letting the rhythm die	Going quiet after the first statement restarts the speculation you paid so much to stop.



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Capricorn Consulting is a US-registered strategic marketing and communications consultancy serving purpose-driven organizations and growing businesses. Senior-led and hands-on, we work across brand strategy, communications, crisis and reputation, and stakeholder engagement, with experience spanning international development programmes, sustainability initiatives, and B2B brands across Asia, Europe, and North America.

This kit is free to use and share within your organization. If it helped, that is the point.

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