CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS 101

When You're Feeling the Pressure: Managing Issues & Crises

DEFY COMMUNICATIONS

October 14, 2025

Overview

1

The Social Sector, community leaders, and nonprofits in general are operating under unprecedented pressure and uncertainty

2

Attacks on equity, shifting politics, funding uncertainty

3

Scrutiny of values, programs, and partnerships

4

Preparation builds calm, not fear

5

You don’t need a big PR budget — you just need a clear plan

Session Roadmap & Learning Goals

1. **Understanding Pressure: Issues vs. Crises**
2. **Crisis Readiness Framework: Who, What, How**
3. **The 10-Minute / 10-Day / 10-Week Approach**
4. **Tools, Templates & Takeaways**
5. **Q&A**

Learning Goals

1. Tell the difference between an issue and a crisis
2. Avoid "issue inflation" — overreacting to manageable problems
3. Build a simple response framework for your team
4. Prioritize actions in the first 10 minutes, 10 days, and 10 weeks
5. Communicate with clarity, empathy, and credibility under pressure

What Do We Mean By “Pressure”

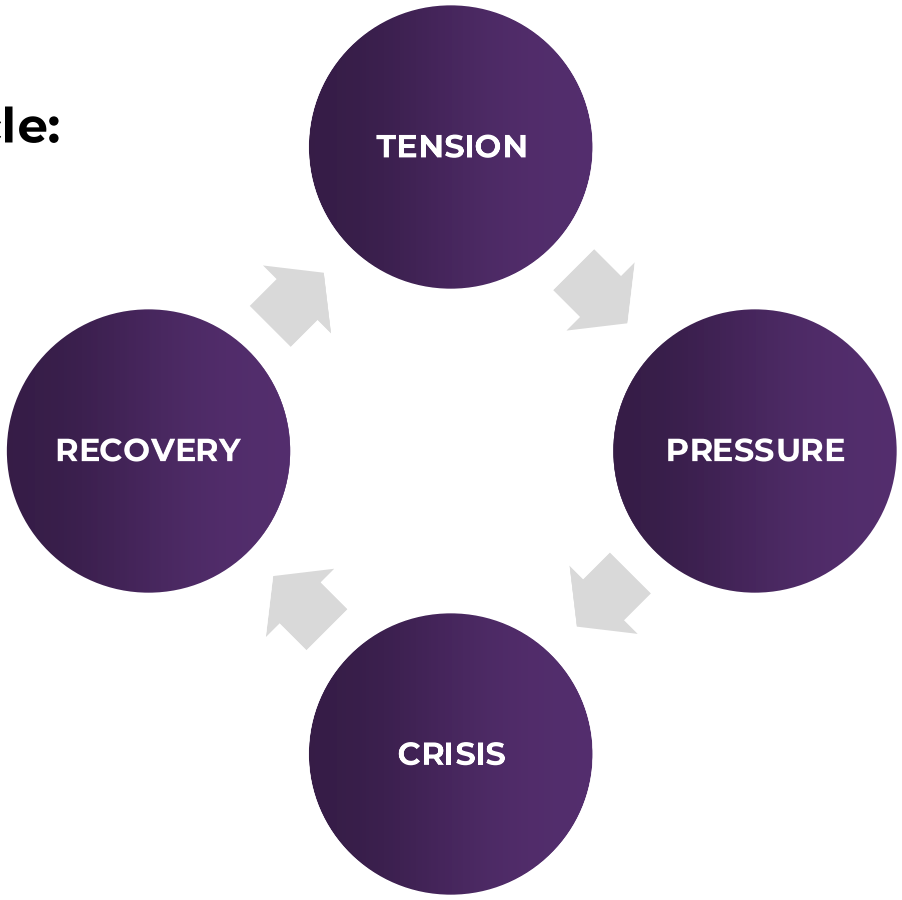
Every organization experiences **pressure**

Not all pressure = **crisis**

The goal is to **respond proportionally**, not react impulsively

Pressure can clarify — or it can cloud — your judgment

Organization Pressure Cycle:



Issues Vs. Crisis

In crisis communications, one of the most critical distinctions to make—especially early on—is whether you're facing a crisis or an issue. Misdiagnosing an issue as a crisis can drain resources, escalate stakeholder anxiety, and create unnecessary reputational damage.

ASPECT	ISSUE	CRISIS
Definition	A challenge, concern, or area of risk that requires monitoring and management but does not threaten the core functioning or reputation of the organization.	A disruptive, high-stakes event that threatens operations, public trust, reputation, or legal standing, requiring urgent and coordinated response.
Urgency	Can often be addressed through regular communication channels and planned responses.	Demands immediate action, typically outside of normal operations.
Impact	Limited or localized impact on operations, stakeholders, or reputation.	Broad, serious, and potentially long-lasting impact.
Public Visibility	May be known only to internal or limited external stakeholders.	Often highly visible and under public or media scrutiny.
Control	The organization has time and agency to manage the issue before it escalates.	Control is diminished; external forces (media, regulators, public opinion) are often driving the narrative.

Beware of “Issue Inflation”

Definition: “Issue inflation” happens when an organization treats a manageable problem as if it were a full-scale crisis — escalating pressure instead of containing it.

WHY IT HAPPENS:

- High emotional investment in mission and values
- Fear of funder or media attention
- Internal anxiety or lack of clarity about response roles
- Pressure to “do something” immediately
- Desire to fight in the face of injustice

WHAT IT CAUSES:

- Unnecessary alarm inside the organization
- Conflicting messages or mixed signals externally
- Fatigue and credibility loss (“the sky is always falling”)

HOW TO PREVENT IT:

- Pause, assess, and ask:
- Who is actually affected? (Scope)
- How visible is this right now? (Visibility)
- What’s at risk if we pause before reacting? (Impact)

Breakout #1: Issue or Crisis?

PROMPT:

In pairs or trios, share:

- A moment when your organization faced pressure — or one you fear might happen.
- How did you recognize it was serious?
- What made it stressful?
- Looking back, was it an issue or a crisis — and what helped you decide?
- Could the situation have been an opportunity?

SCENARIOS

1. A key funder publicly questions your organization's approach on social media.
2. A staff conflict spills into public view after a partner mentions it online.
3. A program shut-down leaks out before it's been formally announced (Optional fourth if time allows: A community member posts a critical story about your impact results.)

Crisis Readiness Framework: Who, What, How

WHO:

Gather your steady voices.
Keep it small (3–5 people max)

Include:

- Executive or lead decision-maker
- Trusted communicator or storyteller (internal or external)
- A team member closest to the issue or community affected
- A board member or funder contact only if they're directly relevant

Focus on clear roles, not titles

WHAT:

Clarify the situation before reacting.
In your small group, ask yourselves:

- Is it an issue or a crisis?
- Who's impacted, and what is actually known?
- What's the most credible, verifiable version of the story right now?

HOW:

Respond with calm, coordination, & values.
Align internally first

- Draft a short "holding statement" early ("We're aware and assessing…")
- Center empathy, clarity, and mission alignment
- Map your stakeholders so, you can reach them.
- Monitor — don't amplify — online conversations

Crisis Readiness Framework: Who needs to be in the room?

Keep it small. Keep it clear.
Your "core response team" doesn't have to be formal — just functional.

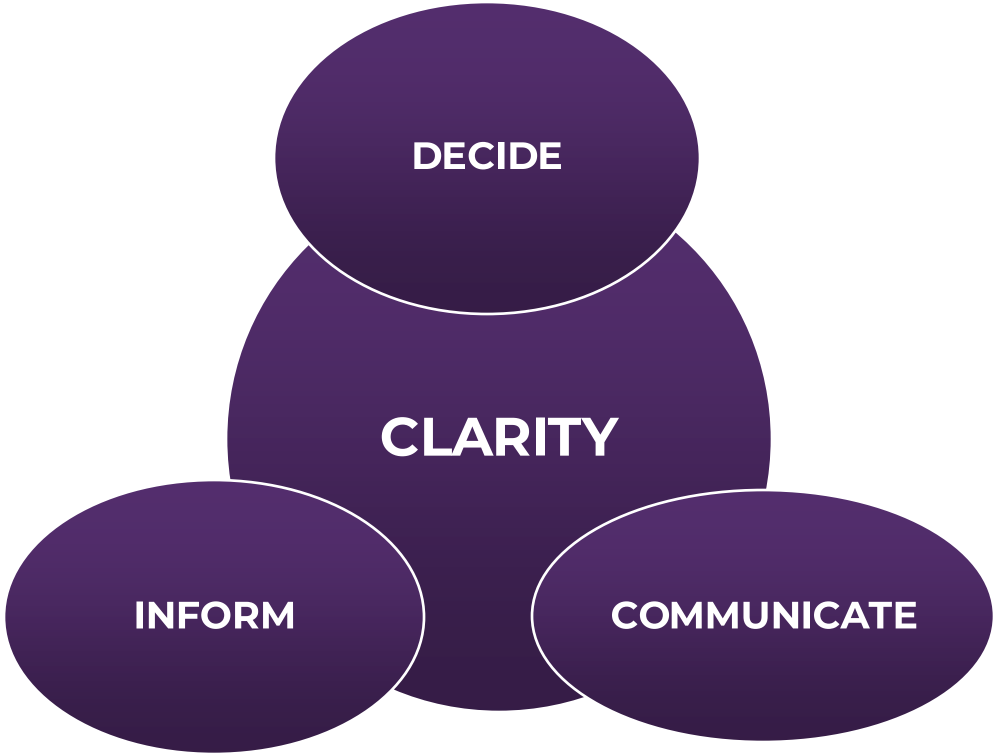
Aim for 3–5 steady voices:

1. Lead Decision-Maker – Executive Director, Program Lead, or equivalent
2. Communicator / Spokesperson – whoever can speak clearly and calmly on behalf of the org
3. Subject Matter Voice – someone closest to the situation or community affected

If you don't have a communications person or outside agency:

Reach out to your funder or support network (like Spring Point Partners) for ad hoc technical assistance.

They can sometimes lend communications capacity or connect you to a trusted advisor or firm for crisis support.



Crisis Readiness Framework: The What (Decision Protocols)

Step back before you step out.

When something happens, pause long enough and work through decision protocols:

Define	**Is this an issue or a crisis?** • What's the scope and speed of what's happening? • Could this threaten your mission, funding, or credibility?
Assess	**Who is affected and how? Who needs to know?** • Staff? Partners? Funders? Community members? • Who needs communication right now, and who can wait?
Confirm	**What do we know (and not know)?** • Confirm facts before reacting publicly. • Avoid filling in gaps — assumptions fuel escalation.

Crisis Readiness Framework: Managing the First Wave (How)

1 INTERNAL ALIGNMENT

Align Internally Before Going Public

- Make sure staff, community partners, board, and other key constituents hear from you first.
- No surprises — internal consistency builds external credibility.

2 STATEMENT

Draft a Simple Holding Statement Early

- Acknowledge awareness: “We’re aware, we’re assessing, and we’ll share updates as soon as we can.”
- Avoid speculation or defensiveness.
- Center empathy, accountability, and your mission values.

3 MONITORING

Monitor Before You Amplify

- Track what’s being said — don’t fuel the fire.
- Correct misinformation only once you have verified facts.
- Remember: every comment or email is part of the public record.

4 TONE

Stay Human

- Keep messages calm, clear, and compassionate.
- Acknowledge uncertainty when it’s real.
- Tone often matters more than technical detail.

Breakout #2: How Crisis-ready Are We?

PROMPT:

In small groups
(3–4 people), discuss:

SCENARIOS

1. How crisis ready do you think your organization is right now?
   - Do you have a clear process or team identified?
   - How hard would it be to convene everyone?
   - Is there a central place where your stakeholder information lives?
   - Have you ever discussed what a “crisis” looks like internally?

2. What challenges or gaps do you notice after hearing this framework?
   - Who would you pull into the room?
   - What would slow your response down?
   - What small step could you take this month to be more ready?

Prioritizing Under Pressure: The 10-10-10 Framework

TIMEFRAME	FOCUS	ACTIONS & MINDSET
First 10 Minutes	*Stabilize & Gather Facts*	• Pause and assess using WHO / WHAT / HOW • Confirm key facts; don't speculate • Align internally before responding • Draft a brief holding statement • Reach your priority stakeholders (board, staff, others situationally dependent)
First 10 Days	*Communicate & Coordinate*	• Share updates with key stakeholders (staff, partners, funders) • Address misinformation- show accountability and responsiveness • Keep messages consistent and values-driven • Do not over-communicate
First 10 Weeks	*Reflect & Rebuild*	• Review what happened and what was learned • Rebuild trust with transparency • Adjust systems and relationships • Capture lessons for next time

From Response to Recovery

1

Early tone shapes long-term reputation

People remember how you showed up more than what you said.

Stay calm, factual, and values-aligned.

2

Transparency earns grace

Admit what you know, and what you don't (yet).

Share how you're learning or changing — not just what went wrong.

3

Center those impacted

Prioritize direct communication with affected people or groups.

Avoid "performative transparency" — lead with empathy.

4

Recovery is relationship work

Repairing trust takes consistent follow-through.

Check in with staff, community, and funders as things stabilize.

Capture lessons learned and formalize them for next time.

Tools, Templates, & Takeaways: Crisis-ready Checklist

✓	**People**	• Core response team (3–5 people) identified • Roles defined: *Who decides, who drafts, who informs* • Contact info stored and accessible (phone + email)
✓	**Assess**	• Decision protocol saved and shared (WHO / WHAT / HOW) • Backup person identified for each role • Clear rule for when to escalate internally
✓	**Confirm**	• Draft holding statement saved (editable template) • Key messages document or values-based language bank • Staff briefed on who speaks publicly (and who doesn't)
✓	**Logistics**	• Shared drive or Google Doc folder labeled "Crisis Materials" • All logins accessible to at least two people • Template emails / posts pre-drafted and ready to adapt

Tools, Templates, & Takeaways: Decision Flow (Issue or Crisis)

Step 1: Scope + Speed

- How wide is the impact?
- How fast is it spreading (internally or publicly)?

Slow / contained = Issue

Fast-moving / high-visibility = Crisis

Step 2: Stakes

- Could this realistically threaten our mission, funding, or trust?
- Would our core audiences (staff, funders, community) expect a response?

Low-to-medium stakes = Issue

High or existential stakes = Crisis

Step 3: Visibility + Verification

- Is this public or private right now?
- Do we have confirmed facts, or just speculation?

Low visibility + clear facts = Issue

High visibility + uncertainty = Crisis

Step 4: Capacity

- Do we have the people and time to manage this internally?
- Or will this stretch us thin and risk mistakes?

Manageable internally = Issue

Overwhelming resources = Crisis

Tools, Templates, & Takeaways: Holding Statement Templates

STATEMENT SCENARIO	STATEMENT TEMPLATE
General Situation	“We’re aware of [situation/concern] and are currently assessing what happened. Our priority is [those affected / our community / our mission]. We’ll share updates as soon as we have confirmed information.”
Community Impact	“We’ve learned of [incident/feedback] and take it seriously. We’re listening, gathering details, and will follow up directly with those impacted. Our commitment remains to [value/mission].”
Staff or Internal Issue	“We’re aware of the situation involving [team/program]. Out of respect for those involved, we’re focusing on understanding the facts and ensuring a fair, values-based response.”
Attack on Mission, Values, and/or Work	“We have heard public criticism challenging our mission and values related to equity and justice. We stand firm in our commitment to [your core principles—e.g. racial equity, inclusion, justice, diversity, community voice, etc.].”

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Q & A