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Issue management: A quick guide to begin a communication response to emerging issues or difficult situations

Introduction

In the world of instant communication, issue management is more and more important as “issues” emerge in public media. A common rule of thumb is how an organization handles the first 24 hours of an issue will color the public’s perception of the entire event. It is based on the idea that first impressions are important impressions.

While not exhaustive, here is a set of guidelines to help leaders begin their initial planning for the first steps of planning a communication response when an issue emerges that either has the potential or is already quickly becoming the topic of public communication. If you’re asking “Will we develop a communication plan for this?” - the answer is yes. Whether or not you implement it depends on how the situation unfolds.

Here’s a quick guide to get started.

1. Describe the situation in detail.
 - What is the situation?
 - Who is involved? How many people? Who are they? What connections do they have with your org.?
 - What are the privacy considerations?
 - Why has this issue emerged? Is it related to something else?
 - Is there a history? What is it?
 - Who else/what leaders need to be brought into the loop/conversation?
2. Identify the stakeholders (audiences).
 - Who are the people directly involved?
 - What communication should be considered for the people most directly involved?
 - What communication should be initiated to other stakeholder groups?
 - List the stakeholder groups. How do you communicate with them now?
3. Who is the spokesperson.
 - Who is the spokesperson?
 - Why is that person the best spokesperson?
 - What are their responsibilities?
 - How will you communicate to others that he/she is the spokesperson?
4. What is the organization’s position on the issue?
 - What is the position of the organization?
 - What will be communicated?
 - What is the overall tone of communication that will be projected?
5. Now – plan your effort!