11 keys to managing a crisis

Gain valuable insights into how universities effectively manage crises in the before, during and after phases.

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Even well-run organizations with excellent financial health and reputations can run into a crisis. Examples abound across sectors — aerospace, banking, automotive, food, technology, fashion, private and public enterprises, nonprofits, and large and small organizations alike.

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In academia, universities have faced crises ranging from suicides to natural disasters, along with unethical practices in admissions, scholarships and investments, issues around gender ideology, corporate mismanagement, plagiarism, sexual assaults and workplace harassment.

These crises can be financially and reputationally costly, sometimes taking years to recover from. Yago de la Cierva, an expert in crisis communications from IESE, delves into these complexities in a new book co-authored with Mercedes Castelló and Paulina Guzik.

The book draws on a wide range of cases, from uncovering a dark past at the University of Strasbourg to medical malpractice (University of Warsaw and the Complutense University in Madrid), challenges tied to freedom of expression (University of Notre Dame), diversity (Hamline University) and corporate identity (Yeshiva University). From these, the authors arrive at 11 steps to help universities — or perhaps any organization — prepare for, manage and recover from crises. They also offer frameworks tailored to specific scenarios.

How to prepare for a crisis

Preparation is key to mitigating a crisis's impact on a university. The authors recommend addressing the phases before, during and after a crisis.

Before the crisis

1. **Cultivate contextual intelligence.** Pay close attention to societal changes, which are increasingly volatile and uncertain. Develop contextual intelligence by identifying trends and managing public discourse.
2. **Establish and strengthen listening systems.** Crises often signal themselves with early "tremors." Set up active listening systems to detect early warnings and minimize potential damage. Employees, students and alumni play crucial roles in providing information that must be addressed promptly to prevent escalation.
3. **Empower the communications department.** Ensure the department is part of decision-making processes, not just a reactive force during crises. It should anticipate problems and participate in institutional responses. Increasingly, universities include the communications director in executive committees, underscoring the role's strategic importance.
4. **Understand risks and anticipate contingencies.** Universities should map potential risks — whether generic, environment-specific or tied to institutional values. Focus on mitigating the most severe risks and define clear responses for

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various potential scenarios.

5. **Develop a crisis manual.** This should include operational instructions for managing crises to minimize negative impacts. A consistent, swift response relies on a clear plan outlining what actions to take and how.

During the crisis

6. **Convene the crisis committee.** This group evaluates the situation and defines the action plan. Coordination and informed decisions based on available data are crucial.
7. **Think before acting.** Analyze the situation and evaluate the implications of each decision, considering all possible scenarios to minimize associated risks.
8. **Communicate proactively.** Provide clear, accurate information to all stakeholders to avoid misunderstandings and maintain trust. Transparency and speed are essential to prevent rumors from worsening the situation.

After the crisis

9. **Declare the end of the crisis.** Once the situation is under control, officially declare the crisis over. This helps restore normalcy and provides closure to the events.
10. **Evaluate the crisis's effects.** Assess which measures worked, which didn't and identify areas for improvement to prevent similar crises in the future.
11. **Plan post-crisis recovery.** Effective recovery depends on learning from the crisis and strengthening prevention and management strategies.

Following these steps will improve your organization's chances of managing crises, preparing for future challenges and emerging stronger.

About the research

The book is a collection of 24 documented case studies, from natural disasters to ethical scandals. These stories not only highlight the challenges universities face but also showcase best practices that can be adapted to other contexts.

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