

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- › Managers must avoid the tendency to be non-communicative during uncertain economic times.
- › Employees can become insecure and non-productive in an unstable communication environment that is fueled by rumor and disinformation.
- › People lose trust and confidence in local governments when they suspect that essential services will be reduced or cut without their input.



# COMMUNICATING THE PLAN

Having a communications strategic plan is only the first step. How you implement it—especially during a crisis—is equally important.

In today's challenging economic environment, local governments across the United States are experiencing decreased revenue collections that are translating into hiring freezes, job eliminations, and program cuts. Needless to say, city and county employees are by no means ignorant of these facts, which leads to uncertainties and insecurities about their continued employment, pensions, and future employment.

Such anxieties have the propensity to create an unstable information environment, leading to decreased morale, decreased productivity, and decreased confidence on the part of the citizenry in their local government. It is during times of crisis—commonly defined as any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of your entity—of the kind we are currently facing that the public manager cannot afford to fail.

This is not the time to refuse to act or to take the wrong kind of action when communicating with insecure employees, public officials, and residents. A well thought out, transparent communication strategy can serve to assuage the jitters experienced by all who have a stake in, and depend on, the essential services your local government provides.

## Crisis Communication Plan

Experience continually reminds us that crises can happen anywhere, at any time, and often occur when they are least expected. When a crisis does occur, events usually unfold rapidly, leaving little time for planning. Although some crises can be predicted and prevented, those that cannot be avoided or anticipated can be minimized if handled properly through advance preparation.

Enter the crisis communication plan. Effective crisis communication calls for putting the necessary organizational structure, processes, and tools in place before a crisis hits. Consequently, if your organization does not have a viable communication plan in place, I recommend you develop and implement one as soon as possible.

In addition, choose communication channels thoughtfully: the manner in which and the forum from which you are communicating can be every bit as crucial as what you are attempting to communicate. During a period of fiscal uncertainty, scrutiny of local government communications is higher than ever as employees, citizens, elected officials, and the media clamor for information.

While a viable, effective communication plan can boost a local government's reputation, poor communication strategies or tactics expose it to ridicule from within and without, regardless of how well intended. A communication plan should be easy to read, simple to implement, and designed in such a manner that it can be modified as scenarios change and adapt to local culture. Finally, such a plan should emphasize the manager's personal visibility, accessibility, goals, and objectives.

### Implementing the Plan

Those who are charged with implementing the crisis communication plan should:

1. Clarify the manager's strategy and vision for dealing with the economic uncertainty. Developing a strategy and vision will help communicate goals and priorities to employees who look to leadership in times of crisis. It will also improve managers' and employees' abilities to make the right decisions in their day-to-day work.
2. Reinforce your strategy and vision in every employee meeting as well as when you address your elected officials. Everyone—from the manager's office to rank-and-file employees—makes decisions every day. They'll align their priorities with the organization's
3. Establish a website where employees can learn what your organization is doing—and what your competitors are doing—to manage the crisis. Transparency is always preferred by employees, but now it's critical. To build trust, ensure that the workforce has easy access to the knowledge it needs to deal with the current situation.
4. Send a weekly e-mail update with successes and challenges. Employees respect leadership that is candid. By regularly communicating with them, you'll help them gain confidence in the organization's future.
5. Meet with groups of employees to listen to their concerns and solicit their suggestions. It is imperative that employees who are involved in addressing challenges know that their organization values their concerns and opinions and recognizes that each department consists of unique individuals, duties, and goals.
6. Ask department and division directors to develop their own plans for improving quality, serving citizens more effectively, and reducing costs. Harness your employees' energy and act on appropriate

suggestions. Send a clear signal: employees' ideas are always valued, regardless of the economic environment.

7. Realign performance goals to account for reduced revenue. If you're forced to reprioritize the manner in which services are provided, let employees know their goals may need to change, too. Articulate the new strategy and explain why flexibility is important.

8. Make sure people know how the decreased revenues will affect salaries and benefits and possibly their jobs. Tell employees as soon as possible whether their salary or their benefit and retirement package, or both, will be changing. Your workforce would rather know what to expect, even if the news is less than desirable. No one likes surprises.

9. Challenge people to cross-train and learn new jobs. Employees can add value—for themselves and the organization—by acquiring new skills. Those who adapt may fare better during a restructuring and will appreciate the opportunity to expand their skills.

10. Share key performance indicators with each employee. This is especially important if your key measures have changed to battle the economic crisis. Communicating this information will also help people understand how their role contributes to the organizational goals.<sup>1</sup>

## CORE ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

- Disseminated information should relate to the communication goals of your public entity and resonate with key target audiences.
- Disseminated information should be clear, concise, and unequivocal.
- Disseminated information should, when possible, stress your public entity's transparency and accountability.
- Disseminated information should increase both internal and external awareness of who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Disseminated information should outline to the target audience how you will implement the strategies or goals communicated, before, during, and after the crisis.

### Communicating with Employees

In a crisis, employees invariably have a high demand for updated information as well as the desire to provide continuous feedback. Before communicating with employees, here are questions the public manager should consider:

- Who will initiate the communication?
- Which groups of employees will receive the communication?
- How or where will the communication happen?
- When will the communication take place?<sup>2</sup>



## Calendar of Events

For information about ICMA events  
Visit [icma.org/calendar](http://icma.org/calendar)

### UPCOMING EVENTS

**November 4** Web Workshop:  
*Leadership, Management & the Key Role of Performance Measurement*

**January 20** Web Workshop:  
*Ethics and Human Resources*

**February 17** Web Workshop:  
*Leadership 101*

**March 17** Web Workshop:  
*Ethics for All Staff*

**May 12** Web Workshop:  
*Ethics and Public Safety*

### ICMA 2010 Regional Summits

**March 11-12** Mountain Plains/West Coast, (San Diego, CA)

**March 25-26** Northeast Region, (Baltimore, MD)

**April 8-9** Midwest Region, (Oak Brook, IL)

**April 15-16** Southeast Region, (Nashville, TN)

### ICMA 2010 Young Professionals Leadership Institute

**March 10-11** Mountain Plains / West Coast Region: San Diego, CA

**March 24-25** Northeast Region: Baltimore, MD

**April 7-8** Midwest Region: Oak Brook, IL

**April 14-15** Southeast Region: Nashville, TN

## Communicating with Elected Officials

Despite the advances in information technology and the increasing use of message boards, e-mail, blogs, Twitter, and other social media, when it comes to communicating with your elected officials, low tech rules. The manager should consistently make time for face-to-face communication. In these stressful, uncertain times, rumors and disinformation abound. These are not the times for the manager to be perceived as scarce or unavailable.

Elected officials consistently expect good and bad news to come directly from the manager. There is nothing more damaging to a manager's reputation than the failure to communicate vital information that makes its way into the newspaper or other media outlet, leaving elected officials with the impression that they are the last ones to know. Such a scenario diminishes managers' credibility with their constituents as well as managers' reputations with persons within and without the organization.

## Communicating with the Public

During times of economic crisis, residents also become insecure. Their insecurity is partly fueled by fears that those public sector services they depend on may be reduced or eliminated outright. Obviously, not all people are concerned about the same projects or services. Some may be concerned about reductions in indigent health care or law enforcement or EMS services, while others may focus on the arts or parks and recreation services.

I suggest that you provide a simplified copy of the current and projected budget (based on reduced revenues) to the public in an easily read and understood format. Rather than attempting to assuage fears, it's best to concede the looming problems, explain why they exist (such as reduced building permit or business tax revenues), and identify actions already taken and plans for future actions to mitigate or correct the problem. Town hall meetings are often

helpful, as are notices placed on the local government's Web page.

## A Word about the Media

In our era of blogs, e-mail, personal Web pages, and related social media, many individuals in your organization have access to news outlets and special interest groups. During times of crisis, such access could prove detrimental to your organization's reputation as well as thwart your communication efforts. This is especially true when the media are flooded with many statements from many sources that don't seem to jibe.

In these situations, it is best if only appropriately trained and, more important, designated employees communicate with the media. Such a practice ensures that rumor and innuendo are eliminated and a consistent, cogent message is transmitted to all.

Further, the savvy manager should always presume that when speaking with a reporter for a print story or recorded interview, the discussion is "on the record" at all times. Finally, if bad news exists, the manager should be the one to report it, up front, with candor.

## Remember This Point

By clearly and consistently communicating your plan and keeping everyone—department directors, division directors, employees, elected officials, and residents—informed during times of economic uncertainty, the public manager can go a long way toward keeping employees' productivity levels high while implementing the necessary strategic changes to ensure the local government's long-term success. **PM**

### ENDNOTES

- 1 "10 Tips to Help Your Employees Manage Change in Uncertain Times," Towers Perrin, 2009.
- 2 Oliver Schmidt, "Effective Employee Communication during a Company Crisis," InternalCommsHub, 2009.



**JOSEPH JARRET** is the chief deputy law director for Knox County, Tennessee, and a former public manager ([joe.jarret@knoxcounty.org](mailto:joe.jarret@knoxcounty.org)).