

A GUIDE FOR LEADERS, MANAGERS AND SPOKESPEOPLE

Crisis Quick Reference Guide

What to do in the first hour, and every hour after.

01

Recognize

Spot a problem before it becomes a crisis.

02

React

Protect people, alert your team, route every inquiry.

03

Respond

Know what to say, and what never to say.

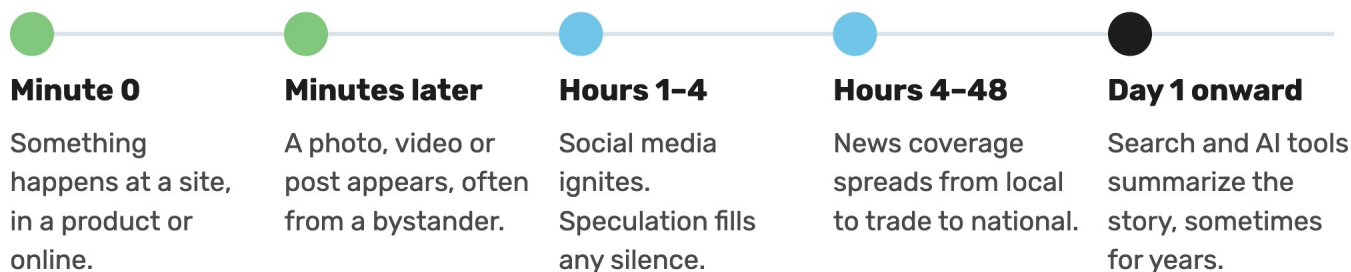
Keep this guide within reach. Share it with every manager, supervisor and front-line leader on your team.

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START HERE

The first hour sets the story.

Crises now move faster, start in more places and last longer than ever. A single phone video or post can reach reporters within hours, and AI tools can keep repeating the story for years. What you do in the first minutes matters most.



Be fast. Be right.

Silence lets someone else tell your story, but a fast mistake is remembered far longer than a careful answer that comes a little later. Be first with what you know is true, show concern for the people affected and keep communicating.

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RECOGNIZE

Is it a crisis?

Not every problem is a crisis, but every crisis starts as a problem. Your job is not to make the final call. It's to notice when an issue is growing and get it to the people who decide.

LEVEL 1

Problem

Affects a handful of people. Likely resolved quickly, without media attention or real risk to your reputation.

Your move: Handle it, document it and tell your supervisor.

LEVEL 2

Could escalate

Affects more people. Could draw attention from social media, customers, neighbors or regulators.

Your move: Alert the crisis team. Watch for signs it's growing.

LEVEL 3

Crisis

Affects many people, involves injury or safety, or poses a serious risk to your reputation.

Your move: Alert the crisis team immediately. Follow the plan.

Warning signs an issue is growing

- **Injuries or health effects**, or first responders on site
- **Media calls** or a reporter asking questions
- **Employee chatter**, with current or former staff posting about it in public
- **Legal words** like "lawsuit," "violation" or a regulator's name in complaints or posts
- **Platform jumps**, such as a post moving from one social site to another and then to reporters
- **Pointed questions** from a customer, partner or neighbor about a rumor

When in doubt, escalate.

Escalating too early costs a phone call. Escalating too late can become the story. Nobody should get in trouble for a false alarm.

REACT

Your first 60 minutes

If you're first on the scene, you're a first responder, not the spokesperson. Remember three words.

Protect

People first. Call 911 if needed and get everyone out of harm's way.

Alert

Call your crisis team contact now. Don't wait for all the facts.

Route

Send every media, customer or public inquiry to your spokesperson.

Six things to do in the first hour

- 1 Make it safe.** Follow emergency procedures and account for your people.
- 2 Escalate now.** Share what you know, even if it's incomplete.
- 3 Write it down.** Log times, what you saw, who you told and who called. Facts only.
- 4 Don't speculate.** Share facts with the crisis team, not guesses with coworkers or the public.
- 5 Route every inquiry.** Take names and numbers and pass them on right away.
- 6 Take care of your team.** Tell them what you can and where updates will come from.

Fill this in now, before you need it

Crisis team contact (name and cell)

Backup contact

Designated spokesperson

Who can order an evacuation

When in doubt, get people out. "I smell something" is a warning, not an interruption. Safety decisions can't wait for permission.

RESPOND

When a reporter, or anyone with a phone, approaches

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

"I'm not the right person to speak for our organization, but I want to make sure you get accurate information. Let me connect you with our spokesperson. Can I get your name, outlet and deadline?"

CAPTURE AND PASS ON

Stay calm and polite. Assume you're on camera from the moment someone approaches. Don't block the lens, argue or walk away without a word. Check what's behind you, too.

Words matter

INSTEAD OF	TRY
"No comment."	"I don't have that information, but I'll make sure the right person gets back to you."
"I think it was probably..."	"The cause is being looked into. I don't want to guess."
"Off the record..."	Nothing is off the record. If you don't want to see it quoted, don't say it.
"That's not my department."	"Let me connect you with the person who can help."
"It's really not a big deal."	"We take this seriously. Safety is our first priority."

RESPOND

The four-part holding statement

A holding statement buys time without going silent. It shows you're aware, you care and you're acting, before you have every fact. Use the same four parts to brief your own team.

1

Care

Show concern for people first.

2

Facts

What you know. Confirmed facts only.

3

Action

What you're doing about it now.

4

Next

When and where you'll update.

TEMPLATE

"Our first concern is the safety of our employees and our neighbors. At about [time] today, an incident occurred at our [location]. Emergency crews responded, and [confirmed status]. We are cooperating fully with [agency] and have begun our own review. We will share more information by [time] at [channel]."

Leave out

The cause, until it's confirmed

Blame, of anyone

Injury details. Those belong to first responders and hospitals.

Numbers that haven't been verified

Promises you can't keep

Then keep going

Update on the schedule you promised, even when the update is "no new information yet."

Send the same core message to employees, customers, partners and media.

Have legal counsel review any statement that touches on litigation.

IF THE CAMERA TURNS TO YOU

Interview ground rules

Prepare for any interview the way you'd prepare for a job interview: know the audience, anticipate the questions and know the message you want to deliver.

Everything is on the record

Before, during and after.
The mic may still be on.

The reporter isn't your friend

A journalist's first loyalty is to the story.

Talk facts, not what-ifs

Only what you know and are authorized to share.

Keep it short

20–30 seconds for TV. A crisp 10–15 words for print.

Speak for yourself

Not for customers, regulators or other organizations.

Use plain English

Skip jargon and acronyms the public won't know.

Not ready? Ask for a little time. Before you hang up, learn the story's focus, the reporter's deadline and what they already have. Then call back well before the deadline.

Stay on message: A-B-C

A

Acknowledge the question briefly and honestly.

B

Bridge with a transition phrase.

C

Communicate your key message.

Q: "Are you going to change how you do things?"

A: "That's a fair question, and we're reviewing every step of our process. **What's most important right now is** making sure the people affected have the information they need. We're working around the clock to do that."

Bridge phrases: "What I can tell you is..." • "What's most important is..." • "Let me put that in context..."

Bridging isn't dodging. Answer honestly first, then steer. Say your most important point first, and have no more than three key messages.

IF THE CAMERA TURNS TO YOU

Tough questions, calm answers

THE TRAP	SOUNDS LIKE	YOUR RESPONSE
The what-if	"What if someone dies?"	"I'm not going to speculate. What I know is..."
The blame question	"Whose fault was this?"	"The cause is under investigation. Our focus right now is..." Never shift blame.
Pending litigation	"Will you settle?"	"We don't comment on pending litigation, but I can tell you..."
The loaded premise	"Why did you ignore the warnings?"	Don't repeat the negative words. Calmly correct the record and state the facts.

Never ignore a reporter, but don't rush an incomplete answer to meet a deadline. It's fine to say a statement will follow once the facts are confirmed.

Look and sound the part

IN PERSON

Stand with feet planted and hands relaxed.

Look at the reporter, not the camera.

Check your backdrop: no smoke, crews or signage.

Move somewhere quiet. Take off sunglasses.

Wear solid colors, not busy patterns.

VIDEO CALL OR PHONE

Camera at eye level, light in front of you.

Quiet room with a plain background.

Look into the lens, not at your own image.

Assume you're recorded from the first second.

Silence notifications and close other apps.

Tone can hurt more than a wrong fact. Calm, caring and brief beats polished and cold. Show real concern without assigning fault.

RESPOND

Phones, posts and fakes

Don't feed it

During an incident, don't post, share photos or speculate, even in private groups. Screenshots travel.

Report it

See a post or rumor gaining traction? Screenshot it and send it to the crisis team. Don't argue.

Verify it

An urgent call or video "from leadership" asking for money or data? Confirm through a known channel.

Responding to comments online

A question of general interest	Reply with approved information.
A specific or private matter	Move it offline with a general inquiry email or phone number, never a staff member's name.
Criticism without specifics	Don't respond, but keep monitoring for escalation.
Easily corrected misinformation	Correct it with facts, publicly or by direct message.

Pause scheduled marketing posts during a crisis. An upbeat promotion mid-incident looks tone-deaf.

Four deepfakes to be ready for

Minutes matter

A fake product failure: staged video of a product causing harm

A fake executive: a leader seeming to announce layoffs or wrongdoing

A fake position: your brand seeming to take a political side

A fake request: a cloned voice asking staff for money or files

STEP 1

Verify it's fake before saying so

STEP 2

Pause scheduled posts

STEP 3

Issue a holding statement

STEP 4

Explain with evidence

STEP 5

Update until it's contained

Never forward a suspected fake, even to ask "is this real?" Tell employees before the public, so they hear the truth from you first.

LEAD

Your team hears it from you first

Rumors fill silence. Brief your people early and often, even when the update is "no new information yet." Your employees are among your most trusted voices.

What we know

Confirmed facts only.

What we're doing

The actions under way right now.

What I need from you

Stay safe, route inquiries, don't post or speculate.

Where updates will come from

Name the official channel: email, text, huddles.

Six principles for every response

Be first. The first source often becomes the trusted one.

Be right. Say what you know, what you don't and what you're doing.

Be credible. Honesty, even with bad news, keeps trust intact.

Show empathy. Acknowledge feelings. Care comes before facts.

Promote action. Give people something useful to do.

Show respect. Respectful words build cooperation.

After the crisis: review within 48-72 hours

How and why did it happen?

How can we keep it from happening again?

Did our messages land, and were they consistent?

Did we follow the plan? Where did it fall short?

Do we need more trained spokespeople?

Which channels worked, and which didn't?

Then update the plan and training, and brief employees on what happened, the good and the bad.

PREPARE

How ready are you?

Check off what's already in place. Every box left empty is a gap to close before you need it.

PEOPLE AND ROLES

- ☐ A crisis team is named, with clear roles and backups
- ☐ Primary and backup spokespeople are chosen and media-trained
- ☐ Every employee knows who the spokespeople are and where to send inquiries
- ☐ Spokespeople can be reached by the media 24 hours a day
- ☐ New-hire training covers the media policy and crisis basics

PLANS AND MESSAGES

- ☐ Your top risks and most critical operations are identified
- ☐ A written crisis communications plan has been reviewed in the past year
- ☐ Holding statements and key messages are ready for likely scenarios
- ☐ Messaging is planned for each audience: employees, customers, partners, media and community
- ☐ Vendors and partners know the plan and their part in it
- ☐ The plan has been tested with a drill or tabletop exercise

TOOLS AND MONITORING

- ☐ An up-to-date emergency contact list is available to the whole crisis team
- ☐ Media and social monitoring is set up, with clear triggers for escalation
- ☐ Backup ways to communicate exist if phones, email or servers go down
- ☐ Your website can handle a surge in traffic, and a crisis page can go live quickly

O'KEEFFE PR

PUBLIC RELATIONS + CONTENT MARKETING

The best time to prepare is before you need to.

For more than 30 years, O'Keeffe PR has helped organizations protect and grow their reputations. We help you get ready for a crisis, guide you through one and help rebuild trust afterward.

Prepare

Crisis plans, holding statements, media training and simulations

Respond

Senior counsel, messaging, media and stakeholder communications

Recover

Post-crisis review and reputation rebuilding through PR, content and search

FACING A CRISIS RIGHT NOW?

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This guide offers general communications guidance, not legal advice. Consult legal counsel on statements involving litigation or regulatory matters.