

Crisis Communication Template

Module 4.5 — Advanced Media Strategy: Crisis Protocol for Advocacy Organizations

What Makes a Crisis Different from Negative Coverage

Negative coverage is a story that doesn't help you. A crisis is a story that threatens your organization's credibility, relationships, or ability to operate. The distinction matters because they require different responses. Not every bad day is a crisis. Your protocol should define the threshold explicitly — so you're not making that call under pressure.

Crisis Type Classification

Crisis Type	Description	Severity	First Responder
External — Policy	Negative investigative piece about your issue area or organization's effectiveness	Moderate	Communications Lead + ED
External — Factual	Demonstrably false or misleading story about your organization	High	ED + Legal Counsel
Internal — Conduct	Staff, board member, or volunteer misconduct made public	Critical	ED + Board Chair + Legal
Internal — Financial	Questions about financial management or use of funds	Critical	ED + Board Chair + Auditor
Social Media — Viral	Coordinated attack or viral negative content	Moderate–High	Communications Lead + ED
Coalition — Defection	Key ally publicly withdraws or contradicts coalition position	Moderate	ED + Relationship Steward

Activation Threshold

This protocol activates when ANY of the following are true:

Threshold	Definition
Media contact in last 2 hours	A journalist has contacted the organization requesting comment
Social media velocity	Negative content has 500+ shares or is trending in your geography
Key stakeholder contact	A funder, board member, or major ally has called about the issue
Leadership judgment	ED or Communications Lead judges the issue threatens organizational credibility

First 2-Hour Response Checklist

Time	Action
0:00–0:15	ED and Communications Lead convene — phone or in person
0:15–0:30	Assess: What is the actual claim? What is true? What is false? What is missing?

0:30–0:45	Decision: Respond now, respond later, or hold? Who speaks?
0:45–1:00	Draft holding statement (see below) — review, approve
1:00–1:15	Notify board chair and key allies before they see it elsewhere
1:15–1:45	Designated spokesperson delivers holding statement if media inquiry exists
1:45–2:00	Internal debrief: What full response is needed? Who owns it? By when?

Holding Statement Templates

A holding statement buys time without conceding ground. Use one of these until a full response is ready:

Situation	Holding Statement
Factual dispute	"We are reviewing the claims in this report carefully. We will have a full response by [time]. [Organization] has [X-year] track record of [brief credibility statement]."
Conduct allegation	"We take all concerns about conduct seriously. We are conducting an immediate internal review and will share findings when that review is complete."
Financial question	"[Organization]'s finances are audited annually by [Firm]. We are reviewing the specific concerns raised and will respond in full by [time]."
No comment (when warranted)	"We have nothing to add at this time. We will communicate when we have something factual and complete to say."

What You Will NOT Do in a Crisis

Don't	Why
Speculate	Never say 'I think' or 'probably' about facts you don't know. Only state what you know.
Attack the reporter	Attacking the source shifts the story from the issue to your credibility.
Over-apologize	Apologizing for things that haven't been established as wrong creates the impression of guilt.
Go silent for 24+ hours	Silence in a crisis reads as confirmation. Acknowledge, hold, then respond.
Improvising the message	Use the protocol. That's what it's for.