

# How to survive a PR crisis situation

 By [Jennifer Leppington-Clark](#)

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When preparing for and reacting to a crisis that could have an impact on your company or brand's reputation, here are five tips to help deliver a positive outcome.



Jennifer Leppington-Clark, managing director at Hill+Knowlton Strategies South Africa | Image supplied

## Have effective leadership

In the last 18 months, I have seen more and more how leadership can have a direct impact on the outcome of a crisis. Think about the numerous countries around the world and their response to the ongoing Covid-19 situation.

Some, with strong leadership who are prepared to take decisive action, have fared better than others. Similarly, in terms of a reputational crisis, you need the leadership team of a company to be prepared to act and lead from the front.

## Own the narrative

The normal course of action when faced with a developing situation is to gather the relevant role players and all the data and information to hand. The challenge is that it is very possible that the story, possibly an incorrect one, is already out there in the media or on social channels. We live in a world of a rolling 24-hour news cycle with the ability for news to travel globally in a second.

Sadly, though, this ability to share does not always equate with the ability to share the facts – this makes taking command and maintaining control much harder for organisations. This is why we encourage our clients to ensure that once any agreed communication has been developed, it gets approved and sent out, either proactively or reactively, as quickly as possible. Not saying anything can be as damaging as continuing to fuel a conversation that was dying down.

## Be proactive

While accidents happen and things can go wrong, it is vital to show concern and care for those involved. You should immediately be able to explain what you know (even if all you can say is that you're investigating) and ultimately what you are doing to put things right, for example, what is your commitment to make sure it doesn't happen again.

We can probably all cite examples of situations where we felt that there was a lack of concern by those in charge and a lack of any accountability.



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## Communicate continuously

There are always multiple stakeholders to consider and they all have different needs. Customers or clients want to know how this will affect their service delivery. Employees may be asked questions by family and friends and so they need to know what is happening. And, as mentioned above, the media can be a great ally in helping to get the story out there in a controlled manner.

Often clients are concerned that the 'media will be out to get them', but this is not the case. The media wants the story. They want the facts. Of course you may never have as much information as you want but keeping the media informed can help to maintain your reputation.

## Recruit seasoned spokespeople and management teams

Being a spokesperson for a company is a big responsibility as you are in many ways a guardian of reputation. You do, however, have the ability to be in charge of the situation if you are adequately trained. There are specific techniques that adept spokespeople use to ensure that the conversation centres around the narrative they want to get across. You should never lie and never say 'no comment'. The latter is a wasted opportunity to get your message across.

While getting these elements right can be daunting, working with an experienced PR agency means that you will have the best advice during a crisis, be it mapping out possible scenarios, running risk assessments with suggested approaches, developing messaging or training your spokespeople. While a crisis can't always be predicted and planned for, with the right approach you can maintain and possibly even boost your reputation.

## ABOUT JENNIFER LEPPINGTON-CLARK

Jennifer Leppington-Clark is the managing director at Hill+Knowlton Strategies South Africa.

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