

CRISIS COMMUNICATION A GUIDE FOR OUTDOOR ACTIVITY CO-ORDINATORS



OUTDOOR EDUCATION CRISES – WHEN SCHOOL TRIPS GO WRONG

A crisis that takes place off the school premises will always bring additional complications. The school crisis team still needs to be assembled and take control of the crisis. Think about how your crisis team will communicate with the organiser of a school trip off the premises. Ensure that a list of all attendees of any trip is kept at the school along with emergency contact numbers so that parents can be quickly communicated with.

Actions for the leader of the outdoor education trip:

- Inform the crisis team as soon as possible.
- Give an accurate description of events to the crisis team leader, including times and locations. This will help when developing a holding statement and answering enquiries from journalists and parents.
- The group leader must provide all the circumstances around the incident – even if they highlight a breach of procedure. The crisis team needs to know all of the facts so it can react accordingly. Anything that the crisis team says has to be 100% accurate and not contradict facts that may be forthcoming at a later trial.
- Try and control the flow of information from the immediate vicinity – impress on the group that nothing should be reported on social media until they have been interviewed by the police. Also try and impress on the students that they should not speculate on what has happened until all the facts are known.
- Students will inevitably have mobile devices with them and may ring parents and friends immediately. It is very important that the crisis team is kept up-to-date with developments on the ground so they keep up with the flow of information.
- The group leader should not engage with any questions from journalists or other interested parties – these should all be deflected back to the school crisis team to manage.

In a fatal incident, the police will take the lead in communications with the media. Ensure that the police are telling the school's crisis team what information they are planning to put into the public domain and when.

The school will need to work closely with the police to inform parents, pupils, and staff. It is crucially important to develop a detailed plan to ensure that the right people are told the information at the right time – you do not want the parents of the deceased to find out via social media.

Given the power of social media, one member of the crisis team needs to be responsible for monitoring social and online media.

FURTHER READING

Further useful information about the risk management of outdoor activities can be found on the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) website www.hse.gov.uk/services/education/links.htm, as well as via the following specialist organisations:

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award – www.dofe.org

Royal Geographic Society – www.rgs.org

Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel – www.oep.info

Independent Outdoor – www.independentoutdoor.org.uk



CRISIS COMMUNICATION

HOW TO PROTECT YOUR GOOD NAME

You work hard to build a good reputation for your school. However, all it takes is a week of media hostility or uninformed gossip to destroy it. Schools are often ill-prepared for a crisis, particularly on the communications front, which can often make a sensitive situation worse. No one likes to think of the unthinkable happening, but a few basic preparations could mean your school is better equipped should a crisis occur.

These guide notes address the vital role that communications play during and after a crisis.

One in 10 teenagers bullied at school have attempted to commit suicide.*

**FAST
FACT**

* UK Bullying Statistics 2014 – Ditch the Label.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A CRISIS?

An early decision needs to be taken to determine whether a situation is simply a “bad day” or the beginning of a crisis.

Crisis indicators include:

- Existing resources cannot cope.
- The issue is likely to have an adverse effect on the reputation of the school.
- Things are likely to get worse before they get better.
- The media takes an interest.

A crisis is a volatile situation and requires dynamic actions. Crises might include:

- Sex scandals.
- Drug abuse.
- Historic abuse claims.
- Criminal proceedings against staff.
- Expulsions without adequate explanations.
- Discovery of and potential use of weapons.
- Excessive violence or bullying.
- Examination rigging.
- Poor performance.
- A fire.
- Student fatalities.

DO NOT WAIT FOR A CRISIS TO HAPPEN – HERE IS WHAT YOU SHOULD DO NOW

- Assemble a crisis communication team.
- Appoint the following: a head; a spokesperson for internal communications; and a different spokesperson for external communications. Appoint deputies for these positions – it might be that one of the appointees is the member of staff at the centre of the very scandal you need to communicate about.
- Devise a media protocol for the external communications spokesperson. Include who needs to agree statements before they are issued.
- Put your local regional media on a database, including telephone, fax, and email.
- Rehearse how you would deal with any communications.
- Include crisis communications in staff training sessions, not forgetting induction training.
- Identify stakeholders and their potential involvement.

PROTECTING YOUR GOOD NAME

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Crisis communications cover of up to £25,000 is included in Marsh’s education public liability policy*.

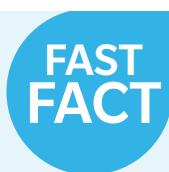
*Terms and conditions apply.

ACTION POINTS FOR COMMUNICATIONS HAVING IDENTIFIED A CRISIS

- Draw up a plan for the immediate future and assign responsibilities.
- Log all enquiries and answers.
- Enlist experienced support staff.
- Draft holding statements.
- Understand the whole situation, write it down, include definitions of terms and circulate to the crisis communication team.
- Agree the extent of stakeholder involvement.
- Decide on and prioritise your audiences, e.g. staff, parents, pupils, media, etc.
- Anticipate questions and prepare answers.
- Consider communication requirements for the longer term, include media monitoring and direct communication with those affected.
- Be wary about making comments that might have repercussions later.
- Think pictures not just words: What is going on behind you during a television interview? What photograph will the local newspaper use to illustrate the story?
- Do not neglect the running of your school — crises can absorb a great deal of management and teaching time.
- Agree on non-jargon terminology.

43% of UK children aged 1–15 years own a mobile phone**

** <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/2013/10/03/younger-children-turn-from-phones-to-tablets/>



WORD OF MOUTH

Research consistently shows that the most potent form of communication is word of mouth. If there is a rumour surrounding a school, and you know someone who works or studies there, you are far more likely to believe their story than any other source of information. Naturally, your staff and pupils will be asked about the events at the school in a time of crisis. What they say may be the most believable. It is vital, therefore, to address internal communications with the same urgency as external communications.

WRITTEN WORD

Although this is not as powerful as the media or word of mouth, a letter, an internal newsletter, or notice board announcement is the only form of communication that allows you to choose your own words and put your message in an appropriate context.

This form of communication is most useful immediately after the worst of the storm, when the media activity dies down and your role is to restore confidence. Care must be taken not to re-ignite the crisis inadvertently during the restoration period.

MEDIA

The media is important. If they are on your side, they can reach all your stakeholders quickly and at no financial cost to the school. If they are unsupportive of your situation, they may become your “opponents”. The media operates to entertain and inform — it is their business. It is not incumbent upon them to be impartial.

You cannot treat the media as a single body. The local BBC radio station can carry your story 30 minutes after it breaks, the local daily newspaper – 24 hours later. The national newspapers rely on the local press to feed your story up to them and TV stations need dramatic footage to go with the words. The *Times Educational Supplement* may understand your plight, but usually only a week later.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

In the event of a crisis, the communication channels include:

- Word of mouth.
- Written word.
- Media (newspaper, radio and television).
- Social media (the internet).

It is important to understand these functions so that you can limit any potential damage and use them to your advantage.

Be selective according to the audience you need to reach. In a crisis, do not waste time and resources on communication channels that are not going to reach those with whom you need to communicate.

The Marsh UK Education Forum is a dedicated group on LinkedIn for all Marsh clients.

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NEWSPAPER INTERVIEWS

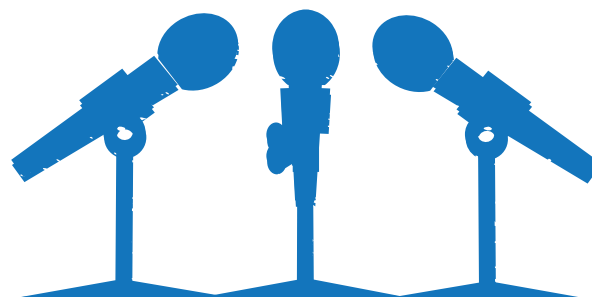
- Fax or email the answers to complex questions that may be misinterpreted. Failing this, make it known you are reading an answer and will do so at a speed so it can be taken down verbatim.
- Do not be rushed into making a statement. Give yourself time to think. Offer to telephone back, write down what you want to say and, if need be, contact a colleague for advice. Always call back if you have promised to do so.
- Make a note of the reporter's name and the publication they represent.
- Complain if you feel you have been misrepresented or badly quoted, but do not focus on minor details.
- Do not expect your comments to be printed word for word. Generally, journalists do not allow you to vet their story before going to print, although it is worth asking if you may verify quotes or check facts for accuracy and legal reasons.
- Never say anything that you would not be happy to see in print.

When denying an allegation made by the journalist, be careful not to repeat it in your answer, for example, "no, it's not a complete disaster". The questions are not printed — only your answers are.

RADIO AND TELEVISION INTERVIEWS

- Do your homework: Will the interview be live or pre-recorded? By telephone, in the studio, or at your school? Who will conduct it? Who else will be being interviewed? How long will it last? How much of the interview will be used (so you can time your comments accordingly). Ask what the first question will be. A good time to do this is when the presenter asks you to say something for "level" – this simply means balancing the voices and microphones.
- Contact the presenter in advance in order to brief them. You will probably be better informed than they are, so they will be grateful for the steer.
- Prepare two or three main points you want to address. Prepare answers to potentially awkward questions.
- Practise your responses before the interview.
- Relax.

- Show you are concerned and emphasise you are doing everything possible to solve the problem.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. If appropriate, say you will find out and let them know, and then ensure you do.
- Remember that the interview is wholly for the benefit of the viewer/listener.
- Do not repeat a damaging question or phrase that the interviewer uses. The viewer/listener will hear it twice but your response only once.
- Do not brush or touch your microphone. It will muffle your speech.
- Do not assume you are "off camera" or that your microphone is off until you are told.
- Do not be monosyllabic.
- Take control of the interview and lead the interviewer where you want to go with your answers.
- Co-operate with the interviewer and find out what they expect of you.
- Tell the interviewer what you think are the key issues on the topic – in other words, what you want to talk about.
- Never bully or ridicule the interviewer, as they represent the viewer/listener.
- Avoid calling the interviewer by name, as it can sound patronising.
- Keep to the main points and use simple statements backed up by examples.
- Do not get flustered by probing questions. Reply with a positive statement and show a willingness to explain.
- Do not get annoyed if the interviewer keeps asking the same question, but do not feel you have to come up with a different answer. Say you think you've already answered it and move on to another point.
- Correct factual errors if you make any, whether the interview is live or recorded.
- Begin and end the interview with a positive statement.



TELEVISION-SPECIFIC POINTERS FOR INTERVIEWS

- Avoid light shining directly in your eyes.
- Sit well back in the chair, fold your hands, but do not cross your arms. Lean forward rather than away from the interviewer, and do not fidget or rustle papers.
- Avoid swivel chairs. If you have no choice, be very careful not to swing in it.
- Remember that the camera may be on you when you are not talking. Look at the interviewer throughout or the person speaking if there is more than one interviewee. Do not stare at the camera.
- Make a good first impression — dress smartly, avoid wearing distracting jewellery or patterned clothing, and do not wear glasses that darken in bright light.

HOW TO MAKE A COMPLAINT

NEWSPAPER

First of all, contact the author of the article. If the author is unknown or there is no response, write to the editor. If you do not wish your letter to be printed, mark it “not for publication”. If your complaint is still unresolved, contact the Press Complaints Commission.

RADIO AND TELEVISION

Your initial complaint should be to the producer of the programme. If necessary, take it to the programme controller. If you are still unsatisfied, the Independent Television Commission has overall responsibility for television programmes produced for the independent network, but ultimately all complaints (BBC and ITV) are dealt with by the Broadcasting Complaints Commission.

For radio queries, if the radio station does not deal with your complaint satisfactorily, then contact the Radio Authority.

CALLING A PRESS CONFERENCE OR A PUBLIC MEETING

It can be tempting to deal with the distribution of information during a crisis by holding a meeting – a press conference for the media and/or a public meeting for your key stakeholders.

PRESS CONFERENCE

As a general rule, only hold a press conference to launch a general appeal, for example, for witnesses to come forward. Do not hold one to defend a sensitive position or deal with the media all in one go.

Furthermore, consider the logistics: Do you have appropriate facilities that can be used without disrupting the school timetable? Do you want journalists, photographers, camera crews and sound recordists on site? Can you prevent them from coming into contact with the pupils and getting their opinions?

PUBLIC MEETING

You may feel under pressure to explain the circumstances to stakeholders. You cannot talk to them individually or answer all their questions by letter or email.

Before calling a meeting, consider the following: How urgent is the situation? Will it take too long to organise? Who will attend? If the majority of the attendees are likely to be the aggrieved, anticipate their questions and prepare the answers. It might be more appropriate to communicate by letter and then hold a meeting to rally support for a post-crisis recovery plan.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on the insurance products and risk advisory services available to you in times of crisis, or if you would like to arrange a meeting to discuss your insurance requirements, please contact us:



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uk.marsh.com/education



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